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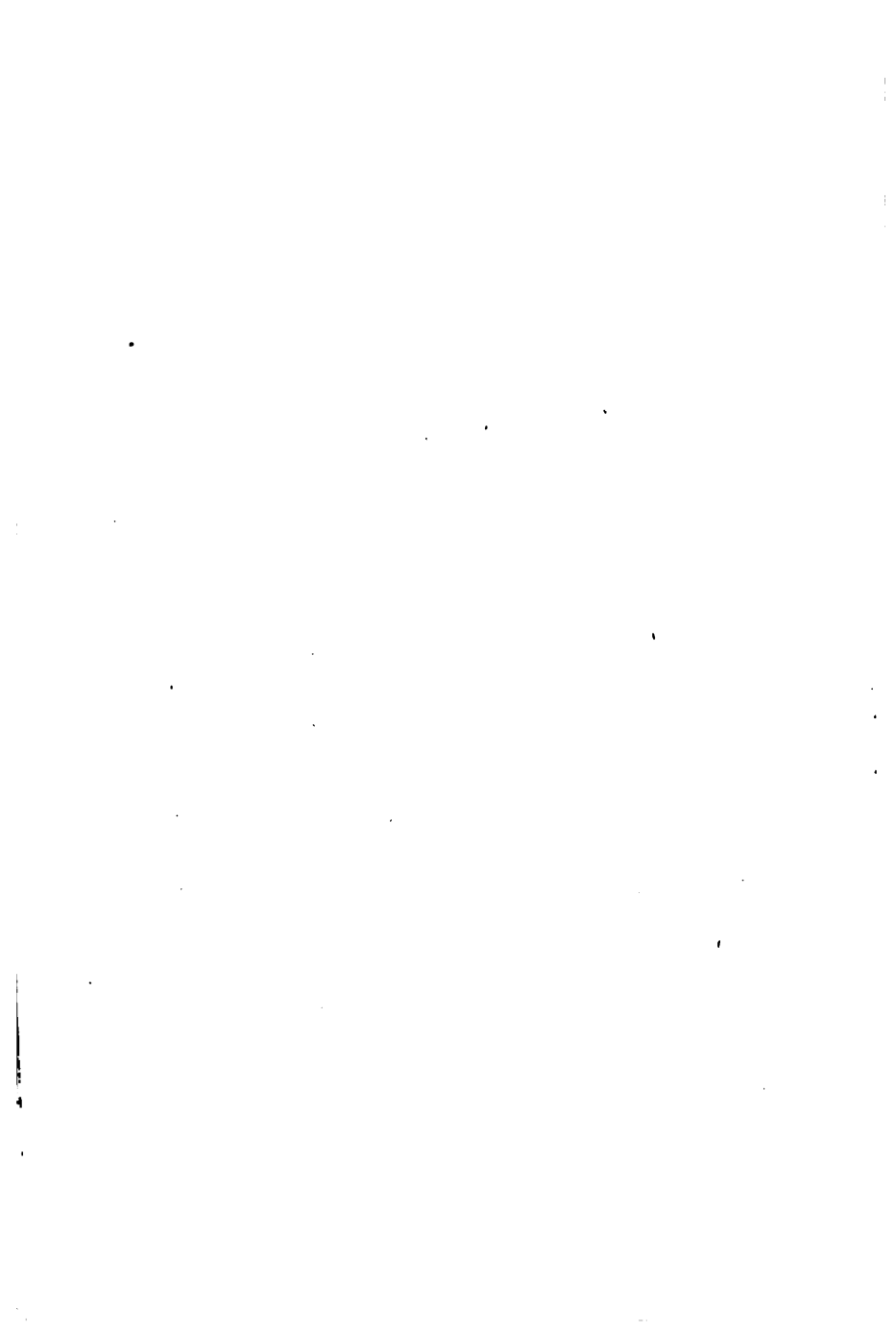
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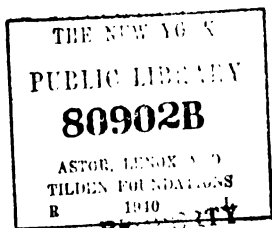
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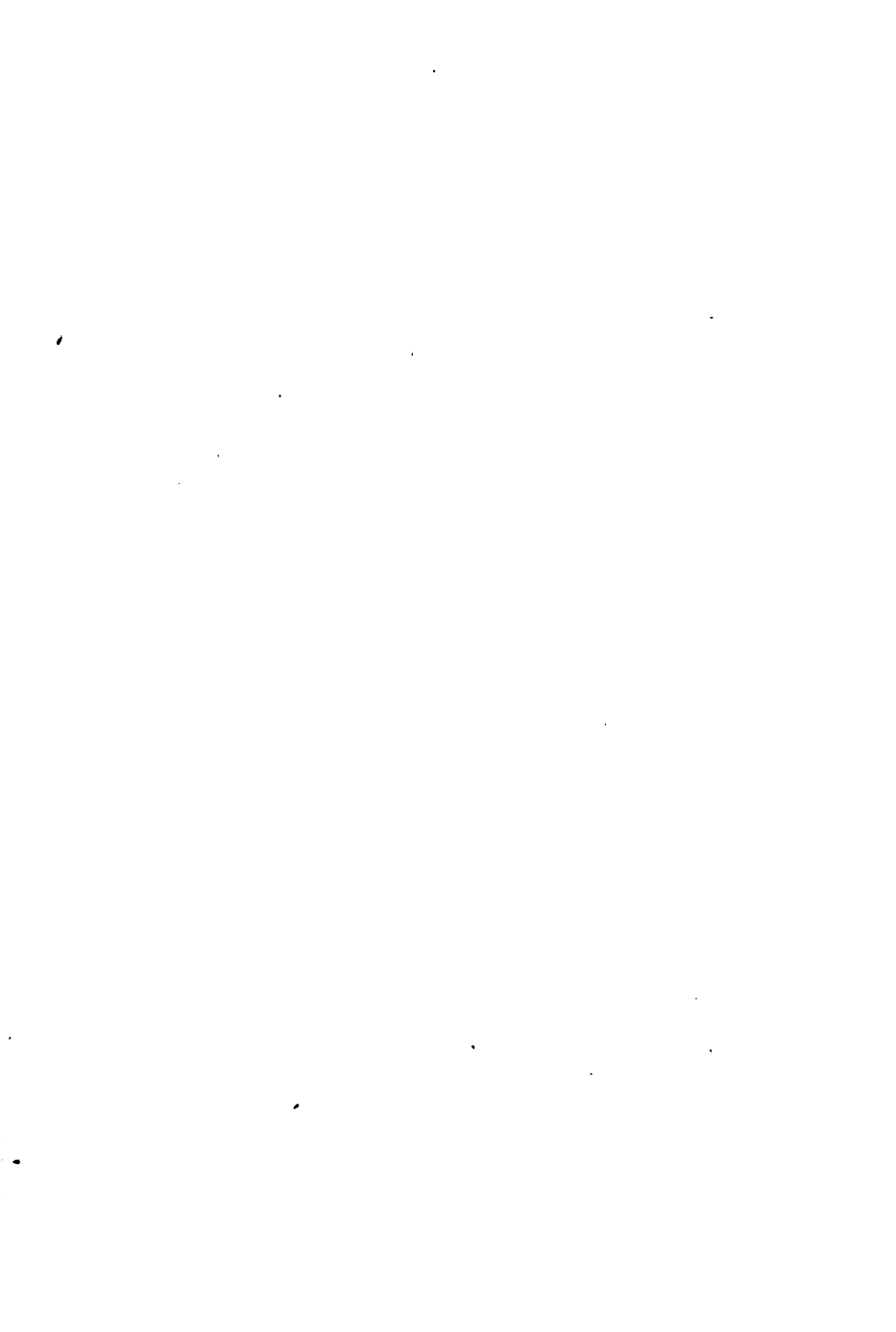
To a Dead Master

I think if you were alive you would be pleased with this story, and I like to think that, wherever you may be, you will be pleased with it.

I recollect you told me once that, in the many sorrows of your later life, you had found your truest refuge and abiding solace in the practise of your art.

I am far from claiming your art, which was inimitable, but in these tragic hours of War I have learned what you meant by art being a refuge and a solace. Even though one's sons and kinsfolk are at the War, and one's heart is burdened with suspense and dread, the mind craves some other outlet save this one, if only to preserve its sanity and to keep the edge of fortitude undulled. So, in the midst of horrors, I have written this tale of joyous and adventurous youth, which takes me back to a brighter world, long since left behind.

I think you will approve this act of mine, for it is something you yourself would have done under similar conditions. If, in the unknown country where you are, the heroic dead should find you smiling at my story, please tell them that my work helped me the better to endure my lot, and they will understand. Perhaps he who reads will also understand, and be thankful for a brief excursion into fields unstained with blood, where the only pillar of fire is the light of dawn, and the following cloud has larks singing in its bosom.



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ROBERT SHENSTONE

ROBERT SHENSTONE

CHAPTER I

I AM BORN

IF I had been permitted to choose my parents, I am quite sure that I should not have chosen those assigned to me by Providence, which would have been a great error, as events turned out. I should certainly have had to give grave consideration to the fact that my parents really could not afford to have me. Indeed it is perfectly clear to me that their marriage itself was a sin against sound economics, which our eugenic philosophers of to-day would have condemned unsparingly.

My father was a country schoolmaster, and my mother, being left an orphan at twenty, had endeavoured to realise on the only asset she had, a cursory knowledge of arithmetic, geography and fine needlework, by conducting an "establishment for young ladies" in the old cathedral city of Silchester. I am afraid the young ladies could not have learned much from her, for I have a distinct recollection that she was unable to grapple with the mystery of vulgar fractions, and could never explain to me how to reach Australia. I am quite sure, however, that they must have learned a great deal from her about truth, kindness, and charity, which are much more important elements in education, although no one thinks so to-

day. She very seldom spoke of that distant past, but I once gathered from her that the reason why her "establishment" came to grief was that during a small-pox epidemic in Silchester she had insisted on nursing with her own hands an old servant who was stricken with the dreadful disease. Silchester disapproved her heroism on social grounds, and the parents of the young ladies considered her from that time too erratic a person to be entrusted with the education of their daughters. It was at this time my father came to know her, and in a mood of romantic adoration married her.

I could never understand how he came to do this, for in later years my father appeared to me a man of extreme caution. Perhaps the years of struggle and poverty eliminated the romantic fibre from his nature. I have since discovered that however cold and commonplace a man may become in mature life, he has usually had his hour of romance, which is treasured in his heart as women treasure a sprig of lavender or a faded ribbon which embodies some sacred episode of emotion in secret drawers which are only unlocked after death. My father, like my mother, never spoke of these things. Yet somehow he created in my mind a picture of a strong man in armour rescuing a fair woman from a dragon, which was not far from the truth, for when my mother's "establishment" failed she was absolutely destitute.

However, I was not consulted on these parental adventures; all that I know is that my parents married on next to nothing, and went to live in a dull village which called itself a market-town, where I was born. Perhaps it was because they had so little to live on that I was born very small. "Why, you were so tiny we could put you in a quart-jug," said my mother to me once, laughing, as she passed her fragile hands

over my arms. I think I was exhibiting my muscles to her, as schoolboys will, calling her attention to the way in which they swelled up into knots when I bent my arm inward, and endeavouring to impress her with my masculine proportions. I felt much humiliated by the intelligence. The inside of a quart jug is not a dignified situation for any human creature, especially for one who has always nourished a high idea of the singular value of his own personality. I have never since been able to look on a quart jug without a sense of animosity and disgrace.

My father never spoke to me on this delicate theme of how I came to enter the world; but I often caught him looking at me with a puzzled expression, as if he wondered a good deal at my existence. I noticed that when I was in disgrace for some childish iniquity he used to speak to my mother of "your son," as if he disclaimed any responsibility for my existence; so that I really came to think that he had none. It was of course very disappointing to him that my mother could produce nothing better than a son who could be accommodated in a quart jug, but that did not seem to justify his tacit repudiation of me. My mother had no doubt done her best, and he should at least have been grateful for her good intentions. One result of this curious attitude of my father was that I came to regard my mother as my only real parent, and my father as a person whose relation to her and me was doubtful and inexplicable. My earliest impression of him was of a tall, somewhat gaunt man, with fine expressive eyes under a high forehead, crowned with a thatch of fast-greying hair, always with that surprised look as if the world had played tricks upon him. And so indeed it had, for, as I came to know later, he was a man of real ability for which the world had afforded no adequate employment. That

is true of multitudes of men, no doubt; but while most men in such circumstances grow reconciled to the discrepancy, my father never did. His great wish was to become a clergyman, and he had only taken up schoolmastering with a view to reading for orders; but as the years passed his ambition grew faint, and he found himself in a prison of circumstance from which there was no escape. I think this was the reason why he was determined I should be a clergyman; had I become one he would have felt that in some vicarious way he had succeeded after all.

I have been credibly informed that I was a very troublesome child, puny, and difficult to rear, as might be expected of a child whose physical proportions could be adapted to a quart jug. My earliest experiences with life were so unsatisfactory that I showed a constant tendency to discontinue them. My mother, who was the most patient of women, once told me that for a whole week of nights she walked up and down the bedroom with me in her arms, until at last she felt strongly tempted to throw either me or herself out of a window. Perhaps she was deterred by the fact that no great harm would have resulted to either of us if she had, for the house was an old rambling low-eaved building, built against a high bank, so that the back bedroom window-sills were almost level with the ground.

How well I remember that house where I was born! It was faced with black split flints, after the fashion of the oldest buildings in that part of the country, and had a black door adorned with a huge knocker in the shape of a lion's head. It should have had six windows facing the street, but two of these had been bricked up, and painted a dull blue, which was meant to represent the reflected sky. The artist who conceived this remarkable illusion had further endeav-

oured to add to it by painting on each a foot or two of yellow blind, and two white curtains, looped back in the most convincing manner against the black walls. As a small child I used to watch these painted windows in the constant expectation that the blinds might be drawn a little higher or the curtains flutter, and it was a long time before I discovered that they were a base deceit.

I think it was in the bedroom at the back of the house—the same room in which my mother contemplated my destruction—that I first came into a consciousness of life. I have quite distinct memories of lying in bed with my mother, and of a certain morning when the sun shone across the bed, making my mother's long curls look like spun flame. Her hands were busy sewing, and as they moved to and fro they bathed themselves in the golden light. My father stood fully dressed at the end of the bed watching her with that puzzled expression which I had already learned to recognise. Suddenly she dropped her work with a sharp cry, and my father came to her side, stooping over her and whispering to her. A moment later, Ann, the servant, entered the room with a bundle of sticks in her apron, and began to light the fire. This was quite a novelty, and interested me so much that I forgot my mother for a time. She continued to moan softly, looking into my father's face all the time with a brave smile. Suddenly I realised that I was quite forgotten, and began to cry. I had a jealous sense of some mysterious bond between my parents, in which I had no part. Then my father stooped over the bed, and took me from it, giving me to Ann, whose hands were dirty with her firelighting. She sat beside the fire, holding me in her lap, and my father disappeared. He came back presently with a short bustling ruddy man, who at once went to my

mother and began to talk to her in a cheerful voice. He motioned to me in what seemed a hostile manner. Ann thereupon gathered me up in her arms, and took me into the kitchen. It was a long time before I saw my mother again. When I did so she was very pale and quiet and the gold seemed to have gone out of her hair. And when she took me into her bed again she cried over me for quite a long time, and my father was again standing by her bed, looking more puzzled than ever, and talking to her in a small tender voice quite unlike the one he always used.

For a good many years this picture hung in my mind as a kind of mystery which provoked me to many strange imaginative solutions. It was not till I was twelve years old that I understood what it meant. "I wish I had a brother," I said, one morning as I was going to school.

My mother looked at me with an odd wistfulness, and said quietly, "You had one once."

"Where is he?" I cried eagerly.

"He went away. He only stayed a few hours."

All at once that old picture of the bedroom with the sun shining across the bed, and Ann lighting the fire, and the ruddy man bending over the bed, came flashing across my memory, and I knew that this was the morning when I had a brother who did not stay. I pictured him coming in at the window, floating on the sunbeams, and going out again when the sun sank, which was really the truth, for he lived only a few hours.

There was another room in the house that has also remained singularly clear to me, the room my father called his "study."

This was a large front room facing the street, one of the rooms with the illusory windows, very bleak by day, but very warm and cheerful at night when a

good coal fire blazed in the grate. It was lined with book-shelves, the books always in a state of great disorder, and on the mantel stood two globes, one representing the world and the other the firmament. These globes were my earliest playthings, and were great incitements to my curiosity. It seemed to me that there was a great deal more water in the world than there ought to be, and so much more than I had any evidence of, that I became quite sceptical of its existence. As for the other globe, with its pictures of strange figures sprawling among little black dots which represented stars, this was quite against reason. I was the more certain of the fraudulent nature of this representation of the heavens because my father himself never succeeded in discovering these vast mythical figures. He used to make me repeat some lines, commencing

The Ram, the Bull, the Heavenly Twins,
And next in line the Lion shines,
The Virgin and the Scales,
The Man that bears the Watering-pot,
The Fish with glittering scales.

On clear starry nights he would take me out in search of these interesting objects, but he never got beyond identifying the Plough, and Cassiopeia's Chair. The Plough was certainly unlike any plough I had ever seen, and Cassiopeia, whoever she was, knew very little about chairs if she supposed this loose collection of stars was a chair. Besides, what was the use of a plough hung up a million miles away on the walls of the sky where there were no fields to be ploughed, and what was the use of a chair in which it was obvious no one could ever sit? When I expressed these doubts my father ran his fingers through his hair and informed me severely that I had no imagination. This really troubled me a good deal. To be without im-

agination appeared a dreadful thing: it was worse than being born a cripple, and I used to lie awake at night torturing myself with the conviction that I should never be much good in the world because I was born with this dreadful deficiency of imagination. I really made tremendous efforts to believe in these monstrous star-pictures, and I am quite sure that if my father had understood how much torture I endured in the effort, he would never have pressed this useless form of knowledge upon me. I hardly expect to be believed, but nevertheless it is true, that when I was a grown man, and began to write books, I was always haunted by the fear that I could not possibly succeed in fiction because I was hopelessly destitute of imagination.

Apart from these infamous globes, however, I think the memories of my father's study were mostly happy ones. I can see myself, a very small child, sitting on my little wooden stool beside the red fire, while my mother's knitting needles flashed to and fro, and my father's pen scratched at the table. My mother always spoke in whispers while my father wrote, for he was supposed to be at work upon some tremendous book that would lift him into such immediate fame that his schoolmastering would cease instantly. If we raised our voices he would rise slowly from his chair, pushing his fingers through his hair in such a way that I always supposed he drew himself up by it. He would then subside again in the same silent manner, as if the effort was too great for him, and the scratching of the pen would recommence. My mother would then begin to whisper again, and tell me how great a man my father was, and how it was most important he should not be interrupted in the pursuit of a thought, so that a thought pictured itself in my mind as a kind of butterfly which a man pursued with a net,

and very rarely caught. I am afraid my poor father caught very few of these golden butterflies of the brain. His only published work, so far as I know, was a very matter-of-fact pamphlet on the inadequacy of the village pump as a permanent water-supply, reprinted from the *Barshire County Herald*, and there are no signs of any golden brain-butterflies in its bald prose. Nevertheless my mother never lost faith in his greatness, and one of the most frequent subjects of her fireside whisperings was my father's "genius," which was a word much in use fifty years ago, and was supposed to connote all sorts of marvellous qualities of intellect, as a rule imperfectly balanced by moral virtues.

On certain solemn occasions, such as birthdays, my father would relax his industry and allow my mother to conduct a process which he cordially detested, known as "clearing up" his writing table. She would carefully examine every scrap of paper, make a neat pile of his MSS., and try to erase some of the ink-stains from the table; he, meantime, standing aloof, in a state of great agitation, like a hen driven from her nest. When all was done she would put a vase with some common country flowers in the centre of the table, and say "*There!*" He would smile somewhat gloomily, and say, "Thank God, that's over." After supper, when the plum-pudding served at dinner made its last appearance in a series of warmed-up slices, the curtains would be drawn, the fire raked clear, and my father coaxingly invited to take a chair beside the hearth. This he would do with the air of a tragic actor, very conscious of his singular distinction. It was to be observed that this tragic air would grow upon him rapidly for the next two minutes. He would nervously straighten his neck-cloth, pull down his cuffs, push his fingers through his hair,

cough in a preliminary and suggestive fashion, and become quite like Hamlet in his aspect of settled melancholy. Then my mother would say timidly, as if she had suddenly thought of a request which oppressed her by its gravity, "Won't you recite something, dear?"

He would reply with a glance of great surprise, as though he had never thought of such a thing in his life, and needed a great deal of time properly to consider so novel a request.

"You know you can, dear, and most beautifully," she would say.

"I used to once," he would reply with the gloom of a man who reviewed from the heights of extreme old age the follies of his youth.

"I am sure you can do it now as well as ever you did," she would reply.

"Yes, do recite, father," I would pipe up from my little stool beside the fire.

Thus adjured, my father would rise, and say graciously. "Well, for the sake of old times then." He would then begin in a rotund rolling voice, which I thought the most impressive in the world, to recite a long passage from Addison's *Cato*, in which the problem of immortality was debated: going on to Hamlet's "To be, or not to be, that is the question," and ending, by way of comic relief, with Cowper's *John Gilpin*. The programme never varied, and it never failed to delight me, especially the John Gilpin part of it. It seemed to me that my father's whole nature was changed as he followed the misfortunes of that adventurous linen-draper. A spirit of genuine gaiety bubbled up from some deep place in his heart, like the bubbles that transform a pool of grey water into a well of diamonds; and, child as I was, I knew that my father was born with a capacity for joy which he had

somehow lost in the flat, stale, and unprofitable uses of his life.

I certainly passed some of the most interesting, if neither the saddest nor the gladdest hours of my childhood, in that book-lined study. My parents had apparently come to an understanding very soon after my birth that I also possessed that curious and rare quality which they called genius, and my father had derived from various biographies of great men the notion that he must begin very early the process of training me in the way that I must go. I am sure that I was not more than five years old when he insisted that I should make the acquaintance of the Latin Grammar. No distinction in life was possible, he constantly affirmed, without the knowledge of Latin, although it was pathetically clear that Latin had brought him none. Night after night he doomed me to sit upon my little stool beside the fire, learning my Latin declensions, while he laboured at his desk; an arrangement which suited me admirably, for no sooner was he absorbed in his own tasks than I slyly substituted a book of poetry for my Latin Grammar. He never noticed the fraud, although he constantly expressed surprise that my studious efforts to acquire Latin had such slow results. Under these reproaches I felt a sense of shame, but in my child-mind I found justification in the conclusion that Latin being a dead language it should be left dead; that the fact that Balba built a wall could be of no importance to any living creature; and that the Romans were greatly to be blamed for not taking their atrocious language with them when they departed from the earth.

When I was about ten years old a circumstance happened which left an indelible impression on my mind. It happened about the time that I had discovered among my father's books a copy of Byron,

which I secreted, and devoured with insatiable delight. And because *Don Juan* seemed the easiest kind of verse to read, and had a rhythmic jingle in it which pleased my ear, I chose this for my peculiar joy, although I had but the very faintest notion of what it was all about. There came an awful evening, when my father, coming into the study so quietly that I did not hear him, stood behind me and discovered what it was I read.

"Where did you get that?" he said sternly.

"From among your books," I replied.

"Have you read it?"

"Yes, father."

"How much of it?"

"All, father."

And in my innocent pride of knowledge I began to recite the description of the shipwrecked Don Juan lying naked in the sea-cave——

"That will do, sir," cried my father.

I had never seen my father angry till that hour. He had always been seen by me as a kind but remote figure, living in his own dreams, and but imperfectly related to my world. His face now was quite pale and a deep furrow grew between his dark eyebrows. He took the book, thrust it in the fire, held it down with the poker until it was consumed, and went out of the room without a word. When he returned a few minutes later my mother was with him, and she was weeping. My father, in the brief interval, had lapsed back into his usual puzzled expression, and stood rather helplessly beside her.

"O my son, what is this I hear?" said my mother.

"I haven't done anything," I replied. "It was one of father's books, anyhow, and I didn't know I mustn't read it."

"It is not a book for a clergyman to read," interposed my father.

This was quite a new light upon the subject. I caught a sudden vision of a clergyman as a very proper person who had no difficulty with Latin but was totally ignorant of Byron, and I was emboldened to retort, "Well, then, I'm sure I don't want to be a clergyman, and I won't be one."

And then my mother came to the rescue most beautifully.

"I'm sure my boy read that book with a pure heart," she exclaimed, "and to the pure all things are pure. And perhaps, dear, God doesn't mean him to be a clergyman after all. He means him to be a Poet."

CHAPTER II

MY EDUCATION PROCEEDS

PERHAPS God meant me to be a Poet—this was a great saying which my mother uttered, and it sank deep into my heart. With an instinctive cunning I perceived that this was a secret between my mother and myself, in which my father had no part. Of course I must pretend that I was going to be a clergyman to please my father, but my mother and I knew better. Not that she spoke of it again for a long time, but she had little womanly ways of making me understand. I suppose even the best women have a certain gift of slyness, which they must needs practise if they are to circumvent by ever so little the tyranny of male domination. My mother, with a kind of innocent craft, would put books of poetry in my way, and lead me on to say what I thought of them. While my father scratched away at his desk she would get me to put my stool close to her knees on the other side of the fireplace, and slyly slip into my hand some thin leather-bound volume of one of the older poets. I read in this way Gray's *Elegy*, and the *Odes* of Collins, and Mrs. Opie's *Poems*. How well I can remember those little stumpy volumes, with their old-fashioned engravings of ladies in slim white dresses standing beside funeral urns in the centre of romantic landscapes, apparently absorbed in the most gloomy meditations. Or sometimes the pictures were of old churches, very badly in need of repair, or of very stodgy seas, whose waves appeared to be made of

putty, with shores of a most remarkable cragginess, on which there was usually a ship in the process of destruction. My mother would quietly slip her finger over the page, and point out these remarkable objects and the verse they illustrated, and whisper "Didn't I think them beautiful?" And I would nod gravely, with a delightful sense of a secret bond between myself and her, although in my heart I much preferred the lively jingle of *Don Juan* to these melancholy poems, which seemed to have far too much to do with graves, and broken hearts, and early deaths. However they were much more interesting than "Balba builds a wall," and the story of all the stupid things Cæsar did in Gaul.

I found the other day an old portrait of myself—a daguerreotype, I think it was called—taken when I was ten years of age, and it brought back very vividly the entire picture of those early days. It represented a very prim little boy, in a very ill-fitting suit, wearing white cotton gloves,—or rather only one, for the other was carried as a sort of ensign of respectability,—and a curious kind of glazed cap with an extravagantly wide peak, under which a very serious and pedantic face appeared. The hair protruded all round the cap in a kind of bush, and I remembered that it was part of my mother's conception of a Poet that the hair should be worn very long. I looked at this quaint little effigy in a kind of comic wonder, until suddenly I found my eyes warm with tears, for it brought back to me a hundred trivial details of my mother's attitude to me. It was she who insisted on the white cotton gloves, and told me that all fashionable people wore only one and carried the other; and it was she who would never let me go to a barber like other boys, but made me wear long curls till I was ashamed of them, and persisted in cutting my hair herself not more than twice a year, and then so slightly that no perceptible

difference could be remarked. It was all part of her conception of me as a predestined Poet, as I have already said. She would have me a creature aloof, quite distinct from all other boys, even in my dress and appearance. And so enduring was the ideal with which she managed to impregnate my mind that to this day I find myself never wearing more than one glove, and I cannot bring myself to have my hair cropped close after the stern unromantic modern fashion.

And then, as I looked at this ridiculous little boy in the faded daguerreotype, there came back to me another memory of certain things which have had a great deal to do with my life, as will be seen later on. On Wednesday afternoons, which were half-holidays, my mother encouraged me to put on my best clothes, gloves and all, and go out to make calls. In a small town like ours this habit was soon known, especially to a group of young ruffians who attended my father's school, led by one called Taddy Walker. It was the custom of Taddy and his friends to lie in wait for me, and when I issued forth to walk up the High Street, they would promptly emerge from some alley and follow me, making loud remarks on my appearance and character. They would walk close behind me, keeping step with me, imitating my gestures, and all the while discussing me in an impersonal way as though I were a hundred miles away.

"Who bilked the barber?" Taddy would ask.

"Give him a penny to get his hair cut," the others would cry in chorus.

"'Tain't real hair, it's a wig."

"He's bald as an egg underneath."

"What price cotton gloves?"

"Shut up. He's going to the wedding of the cat's grandmother."

To these efforts of rustic wit I could usually find no reply until on one unfortunate afternoon I happened to recollect that Taddy Walker's father had been in trouble over the ill-treatment of a donkey, and I turned on my tormenters with the taunt, "Who killed the donkey?"

Taddy grew very red and said with surprising suavity, "Were you speaking to me?"

"I wouldn't have a father who cropped a donkey's ears," I retorted angrily.

"Will you fight?" said Taddy, spitting on his hands.

"I'm not afraid of you, you son of a donkey-killer," I cried, though heaven knows my heart stood still with fear the moment I had uttered the words.

"All right. Take that, then," said Taddy, knocking my beautiful glazed hat into the gutter.

It was impossible to turn back now, and I struck out with all my might at Taddy's nose, which by some undeserved good luck I managed to hit. Taddy thereupon set up a fearful howl, and fell upon me tooth and nail. By this time I was quite mad with rage. I knew nothing whatever of fighting and was governed by the sole desire to get my blows home on Taddy's nose, which was his most prominent feature. At the back of my mind was a crafty idea that if Taddy found his nose bleeding badly he would be properly frightened. Taddy's nose soon exhibited the desired result, which gave huge delight to his friends, who danced round like wild Indians, shouting, "Ain't he bloody!" But my triumph was short-lived. When Taddy's friends saw that their Goliath was about to go down before David they promptly came to his help, and the whole gang fell on me. I felt myself kicked, punched, scratched, and I believe bitten, in a score of places; my cap was kicked into the road and I lay in the

gutter with the shouting weight of half-a-dozen young ruffians on top of me.

And just then a door opened in the banker's house, outside which this Homeric struggle was taking place, and a little girl in a white dress and blue ribbons stood with flying yellow hair and blazing eyes on the threshold, crying indignantly, "Cowards, O you cowards!"

The battle ceased instantly.

"Yes, you are cowards, cowards," cried that shrill little voice. "I saw it all. Five to one, that's what it was. You little beasts."

"Well, he insulted my father," sobbed Taddy, mopping his nose on his coat sleeve.

"And who began it? You did. And my father's a Mag-is-trate! And he'll have you all put in gaol."

This threat went home. My adversaries at once fled down the street, and, relieved of their weight, I sat up, and for the first time had a full view of my deliverer. Small wonder if my first impression was of something angelic. She was so slim and white, with such golden hair falling to her waist, and such grey eyes under dark eyebrows, and she was so tense in her attitude of indignation and pity, that my heart went out to her in that moment, and was never again my own. She stepped delicately over the pavement, splotted with Taddy's blood, and lifted me up, and her little hot hand lay in mine. She invited me into the house, and rang imperiously for the servant to bring a basin of cold water and, in spite of the horrified "O Lor's" of that respectable domestic, began to remove from me the horrid signs of conflict. She gave me a glass of cowslip wine, and a slice of cake, all the time mothering me with deft touches of a wet rag on my bruised face, and so plainly treating me as hero that at last I was sure I was one.

"I think you're very bwave," she said, and for the

first time I noticed that she had an adorable lisp, which I discovered afterwards appeared only when she was excited.

"I love bwave people," she continued, "and I hate cowards. My name's Lucille. What is yours?"

I told her my name was Robert, and I felt quite ashamed of it, it seemed such a poor name compared with Lucille, which seemed like a music of silver bells.

"That's quite a bwave name," she replied. "Robert Bruce, you know—all the Roberts were bwave."

And then she sat down beside me, and took my hand with its skinned knuckles in her soft palm, and it appeared to me that all the pain went out of my wounds. There was no one in the house, it seemed, but the servant; her father and mother had gone away for a day or two visiting some relatives, and there was no one to disturb us.

"She's not my real mother," she informed me. "She's only a Make-believe, Mother."

"What sort of a mother's that?" I asked.

"A mother that didn't born me. It's only mothers that born you that are real mothers, you know. The others only pretend."

"And her father?"

"O, he was a Real Father. She loved him very much. But she would have loved him much more if he hadn't got her that Make-believe Mother, though no doubt he did it for the best."

It seemed a dreadful thing to have only a Make-believe Mother, and I began to pity her, and in a quite tactless fashion told her about my own mother, and how she was quite sure I would be a Poet.

"It must be very sweet to have a Real Mother like that," she said wistfully. "I had one once, but she went away."

"Where did she go to?"

"O she just wented away."

And then in a troubled whisper, "I don't think she died, you know. She just didn't stay. Only you must not tell any one that, you know."

This was a great mystery which I was not to solve till years after. Its only effect on me was to create a sense of something unkind, and I marvelled how any mother could leave Lucille.

It was quite dark when I rose to go, except for the dim redness of the fire reflected on the ceiling.

"May I kith you?" she whispered.

And the next moment her warm lips were on mine, and I went out into the dreary street quite dazed and elated, with the conviction that something had happened to me quite unlike anything that any human boy had ever experienced before.

I dreamed of Lucille that night, a long tangled dream, in which the only definite thing was Lucille's face, which shone out of the clouds of sleep just as the moon does when the wind drives rapid clouds across the sky. I had never had a brother or sister, and no proper playmates; my life had been passed with grown folk, and so she was the first truly young creature I had known. All the youth of the world, with all its intoxicating fragrance, all its eternal charm, rushed upon my senses with that first kiss of Lucille's. And perhaps this took me all the more by surprise because I was such an old-fashioned child, and also because my mother had fed my mind with so much poetry. I doubt if any one has ever yet given full credit for the extreme sensitiveness of a young boy, especially if he should happen to be a lonely boy, who has lived a good deal with his own thoughts. I know that life has brought me many thrilling hours, but I doubt if so pure and sweet a thrill ever shook my heart as in that moment when Lucille kissed me.

I woke next morning with that delightful sense one sometimes has in later life of some great good luck that has happened or is going to happen, without quite knowing what it is; woke with a sense of one's lips smiling, and music sounding somewhere, as though a regiment of trumpets filed away into the hills of sleep, and left the air tingling. And then I remembered, and whispered softly, "Lucille." The sun knew all about it, for the big shaft of light that lay across my bed was the colour of her hair, and there was a thrush singing outside the window who most certainly sang, "Lu-cille, Lu-cille, Lu-cille." All that day the air seemed full of her name, and I decorated my lesson books with many transcripts of it, thinking all the while what a sweet-sounding name it was, and how different from my poor prosaic Robert. I have one of those lesson-books still, *Adam's Latin Grammar* it is called, the same from which I gathered laborious information about Balba and his wall; and on its front page, in red ink, is written *Lucille*, the last two letters ending in a noble flourish, as though I challenged the world to tell me what it thought of that! Only last week I came across the book in my old school-desk which I have never discarded, and when I opened it and saw that name upon the title-page I felt a gentle ghost rise out of the misty past, hovering quite close to me, and filling all the air with that divine perfume of youth and love, which is the finest incense that God permits us to burn upon these human altars.

I did not see Lucille again for a week. The Make-believe Mother had returned, and had no doubt disapproved of Lucille's escapade, and had made her a prisoner in the banker's big gloomy house. And there was another reason of which I became more fully conscious as time went on. In our small county-town society, Mr. Overberg, the banker, stood at a long

remove from my father, who was only a schoolmaster. He soared over everybody else in a sort of mysterious isolation, a man who knew every one's affairs, and held the fate of a dozen farmers and tradespeople in the hollow of his hand. He and the Rector, the lawyer, the brewer and the squire, formed the apex of our social system. He was a big rather jovial-looking man, with bushy eyebrows and whiskers, hair just beginning to turn grey, and a firm authoritative manner of speech. He was always dressed in black, and wore high white collars and a blue tie, with spots of white in it. His boots were immaculate, and he had large fleshy soft hands. He was one of the half-dozen men in the town who kept a carriage, and this in itself was a social distinction. The carriage was a large roomy affair, very high and wide, drawn by a pair of very solemn horses, the deliberate flop-flop of whose hoofs could be heard a long way off. I think they must have been funeral horses at some time; their tails were so long, and their coats so glossy, and the very attitude of their big heads so intentionally dejected. Indeed the whole equipage had a funereal aspect, and when the Make-believe Mother and Lucille drove out, they looked quite lost in it, like unhappy prisoners in a big dark cage.

As I came home from school one afternoon I heard the flop-flop of the Overberg horses behind me, and, looking round, I saw Lucille and her step-mother. Mrs. Overberg was a tall woman, with proud dissatisfied dark eyes, and dark hair brought low over the ears, so that amid so much darkness her face seemed very white, and her lips very red. Lucille was seated beside her, and the moment she saw me she stood up in the carriage and waved both hands towards me. I saw her lips move, and her face flush, and was quite sure that she was calling me. Mrs. Overberg pushed

her back into her seat with an angry gesture, and the carriage rolled on. I stood stupidly gazing after it, my eyes smarting with tears of mortification. I suppose this was the first social rebuff I ever received, and it hurt. In the single proud look that Mrs. Overberg gave me I knew that I was disdained, and unjustly disdained.

I wrote more "Lucilles" than ever in my lesson-books next day, and after dark made an excuse to run up the street for the sole purpose of standing outside the Overberg house in the wild hope that Lucille might see me. Of course nothing of the kind happened. The lower windows of the house were so closely shuttered that only a thin knife-edge of light showed, and the upper windows were entirely dark. I thought of all the cruel things a Make-believe Mother could do to a little girl, and I was quite sure that Mrs. Overberg was capable of them all. And I heartily wished Taddy Walker and his gang would set on me again, if only Lucille might hear my cries and rescue me. I felt that this was a state of mind which Lucille would have approved, and I am sorry to say that I felt more consoled than I ought to have been by the conviction that this willingness to be thrashed anew by Taddy was a most magnanimous temper, of which few boys were capable.

Then there came one blessed afternoon, just as dusk was falling, when I actually met Lucille in the street, close to the old Town-hall. The Town-hall was a red brick building reared on stumpy stone pillars, and the space under the pillars was used as a market by day, but at night it was both empty and lonely. I think she was coming home from an afternoon party at the Rector's; I know she had tiny shoes with silver buckles, and a white dress partly covered by a red cloak, and a bunch of flowers in her hand. She came gliding

toward me out of the dusk, like some red and white blossom sailing down the wind—and I—I could only stand stock-still, staring at her, unable to say a word.

At last I managed to say, "O Lucille——"

But she was beautifully self-possessed, and appeared not to notice anything unusual in the encounter. I think she must have caught that trick of self-possession from her Make-believe Mother, in the way in which children will by unconscious imitation.

"Are you quite well?" she asked in the most polite tones.

This was not the small heroine who had rescued me from Taddy, but a quite different creature, who had relations with Banks and carriages.

Seeing I did not answer, she proceeded further to enquire whether my bruises had quite disappeared, with the condescending manner of a District Visitor.

I looked at her awkwardly, with a flushing face, and could only answer rudely that I was all right.

At that she made me a curtsey, and informed me with the same air of mocking politeness that she was glad to hear it.

This manner of conversation was so different from any I had imagined that my eyes filled with tears of vexation, of which I was bitterly ashamed.

"O you are cruel," I began; and then, with an angry glance, turned my back on her, and ran for refuge into the darkness behind the pillars.

The next instant a pair of warm little arms were round my neck, and she was whispering, "O you shilly, I didn't mean it."

Of course I turned round at that, but very gently so that her arms remained round my neck.

"I've wanted you, O, ever so much, shilly."

She was lisping with excitement now.

"I've cried for you, I wanted you so much. There now."

In the dim light I could see the sparkle of her eyes, and her warm hair was blown across my face.

"You may kith me, if you want to," she said.

Our faces drew together and we kissed.

"Mother dothn't like you," she confided.

"Why not?"

"Only she dothn't."

I was so elated now that I replied bravely that I didn't care, that I was not afraid of all the Make-believe Mothers in the world, that I was capable of destroying all such obnoxious persons without the least compunction and so forth.

She smiled at this, and remarked that I was very "bwave," which was natural, being called Robert, but she hoped I would refrain from bloodshed. I solemnly promised her that I would, for her sake.

"For my thake. It's nice to hear you thay that."

I suppose the little witch thought she had given me all the encouragement I deserved, for her mood changed instantly to mocking gaiety. She made me another curtsy, and began to pirouette round me, the silver buckles on her shoes twinkling like glow-worms in the dusk.

"My mother dothn't like you," she chanted, as though it were a song. "But I don't care. And you don't care."

She receded a little farther in the darkness of the market.

"But I'll tell father. I can do anything with father."

She was out of sight behind a pillar.

"Come and catch me. You may kith me if you can."

Of course I ran forward with all my might, dodging in and out among the pillars. I saw the flicker

of a white dress, and a glint of silver shoe-buckles, and once I touched her, and I heard a small voice saying over and over again, "You may kith me, if you catch me."

All at once I saw her standing at the extreme edge of the market, waving her hand to me. She ran across the street, laughing as she went. The big door of the Overberg house opened, and she disappeared.

CHAPTER III

MY AUNT TABITHA ARRIVES

ON coming home from school one afternoon about a week later, I found to my amazement a shabby "fly" at the door, from which was descending a singularly tall lady. She was so tall that I wondered how she could have compressed herself into the fly, and she appeared to be very cross with the driver because the carriage was not built on more generous principles.

"If the likes of you gets into the likes of that, what can you expect?" said the driver, which struck me as so funny that I laughed. Thereupon she sailed down upon me with a rapidity which allowed no escape and boxed my ears.

"I'll teach you to laugh at a lady," she cried.

"I didn't laugh at you. I laughed at what the driver said," I retorted.

"You've done it now, you 'ave," interposed the driver grimly. "Battery and assault is what you've done. And I'm a witness, I am. I never see such a vicious female in all my life—a striking of a little boy too—no, I never did."

"Are you speaking to me?" she demanded.

"O no, in course not. A few general observations, which them may apply as likes 'em."

"You're a very impudent man," she cried.

"Allus was so from my birth," says he. "It comes o' dealin' with 'orses and females."

At this she turned her back upon him with great indignation and swept down on me again.

"Come here, little boy. What's your name?"

"Robert Shenstone, ma'am, if you please."

"Robert what?"

"Shenstone, ma'am."

"Why, bless the boy, you're my nephew!"

This was news indeed. I had certainly heard that I had an Aunt Tabitha, but she had been mentioned so seldom that she was a mere myth.

"Yes, that's his name," continued the driver, "and he's a real little gentleman, he is. 'Ow he comes to 'ave such a aunt is mysterious, most mysterious."

"Look here, my man," she said sternly. "You put my box down and be off. If I hear another word from you, I'll send for the police."

"Do," says he. "Do, by all means. There's only one perlice 'ere, and he's my brother. Setting in the 'Farmer's Arms' he is, most likely full of beer, which is 'is 'abit. An' he's that fond of me you wouldn't believe. He'd do anythink I told 'im. If I was to tell 'im to take you up 'e'd do it like a shot, 'e's that willin' to oblige."

My Aunt cut his remarks short by herself dragging her box down, and presenting the driver with a shilling. He spat upon it, evidently with the intention of disputing its genuineness; but my Aunt's attitude had become so threatening that he was quelled, and drove off, grumbling. And certainly my Aunt in her anger looked quite formidable. She wore a poke bonnet tied with big violet ribbons under her chin, and a brilliant Paisley shawl. Her eyes were very dark, with dark eyebrows that almost met, and her lips were straight like her eyebrows, with hardly any curve. She somehow impressed me as a person who had done a good deal of fighting in her day, and would go on fighting to the end—without getting the things she wanted most.

"Now, little boy," she said, "when you've done staring at me, perhaps you'll ring the bell for me."

"Please, ma'am, we hav'n't got a bell."

"Knock the knocker, then. Bless my soul, can't you do anything except stare?"

At that I knocked, because she told me to. I didn't like to tell her that my father had forbidden me to use the knocker because its noise disturbed the house too much.

My mother came to the door, and I was relieved to find she had her gold chain on, and a pretty silk apron, and herself looked pretty and sweet enough to melt the heart of the most formidable aunt.

"This is Aunt Tabitha," I shouted, with the innocent glee of a showman exhibiting a rare curiosity.

"Who did you say, my dear?"

"Aunt Tabitha."

At that my Aunt stepped into the doorway, shook my mother's hand, and pecked at her cheek, like a very large bird at a very red cherry.

"Tabitha Shanley—your husband's sister—so now you know. You're Susan, I suppose?"

The box was dragged into the passage, and we entered my father's study. A bright fire was burning in the grate, and its soft glow lit up the long rows of books on the shelves. My Aunt at once sat down before the fire, pulled up her dress, and began to warm her feet.

"You're surprised to see me?" she asked.

"I'm sure you're very welcome," said my mother.

"But you can't think why I came, eh? Well, I'll tell you at once, and that'll save time. I've lost my husband——"

"O, I'm so sorry. That must have been a great loss."

"No, it wasn't,—at least not as great as you think.

He was never much good. However he's dead. He died in New York, and I got tired of living alone in America. Women weren't meant to be alone."

"O you poor thing," said my mother softly.

"You needn't pity me. I'm better without him. But all the same it's lonely, and I thought I'd like to see my brother again. I'm going to pay you for my lodging, mind."

"Indeed you're not. I'm sure you're welcome to stay with us as long as you please."

"I'm going to pay for my lodging," she repeated, as though my mother had not spoken. "I shall pay you a pound a week. You can show me my room."

She rose briskly, and moved in the most determined manner toward the staircase, which she ascended with long strides. My mother followed her, too dumfounded to make any further protest.

A few minutes later my father came in and I at once greeted him with the intelligence that Aunt Tabitha was upstairs.

He pushed his fingers through his hair, and kept them there for quite a minute, glaring at me in the most perplexed manner.

"Aunt Tabitha—upstairs," he repeated feebly.

"She's choosing her room. She's come to stop."

My father rushed upstairs, and there I suppose he heard my Aunt's explanation of her visit. When they came down I overheard my Aunt saying, "A pound a week, mind. Let's have no nonsense. You're poor, and I'm not. So that's settled."

If I had been astonished at my Aunt's appearance when she extricated herself from the fly, I was much more so when she came downstairs. My father was a tall man, but she was certainly three inches taller. She wore a wig of a much lighter colour than her eyebrows; at her throat was a large brooch containing the

portrait of a very melancholy gentleman with Dundergry whiskers; and on her fingers were so many rings that I formed the erroneous conclusion that her late husband must have been a jeweller, who had bequeathed her his entire stock-in-trade. She wore a stiff black silk dress, and altogether was so large and dark that my parents looked quite dwarfed, and even the room seemed to have grown small. My mother, with her bright colour and quick movements, seemed like a red-breasted robin hopping round a large black crow.

Of course my Aunt took possession of the house; she couldn't help it. I, who had been accustomed to regard my father's authority as supreme, was astonished to find that in her presence he counted for nothing at all. She was two years older than he; she had dominated him when he was a child, and she did so still. She called him Bob—fancy hearing one's father called Bob!

"Don't run your fingers through your hair in that absurd fashion, Bob," was one of her remarks as we sat at tea.

"Certainly not, certainly not," said my father nervously; "that is, not if it annoys you, Tabitha."

"It doesn't annoy *me*, but it makes you look foolish."

My mother bridled at that. "My husband has been accustomed to do as he likes . . ." she began.

"Fiddlesticks! He was my brother before he was your husband. I used to brush his hair when he was a little boy."

"And pull it," said my father.

At that we all laughed, and it was astonishing what a difference there was in my Aunt's face when she laughed. It was a grim kind of face in repose, with deep lines drawn across her forehead, and from the

beaked nose to the sides of the straight mouth; but when she laughed these lines melted away and the dark eyes had a glint of sunlight in them. I heard from my father long afterwards some details of her life, which I may as well record here for the proper understanding of her character. She had married a man of eccentric temper, a second-rate playwright, who had taken her off to New York, where she had learned to act in her husband's plays. There she had known a good deal of poverty and hardship. By some stroke of luck her husband had invested a considerable sum which he had saved in his early days in house property in New York, and had spent the rest of his life in regretting his folly. But his folly proved to be his wisdom. The rapid growth of the city which began about the time of his death made his widow quite well off according to English standards. She at once resolved to return to England, being shrewd enough to understand that she could buy social consideration there at a much easier rate than in New York. And that was what brought her to Barton; that, and also no doubt a lonely woman's longing to have some of her own flesh and blood near her as the shadow of the years gathered around her feet.

The portrait of the melancholy gentleman with the Dundreary whiskers in my Aunt's brooch was the late Mr. Shanley; though why she should wear the picture of a gentleman for whom she professed to entertain no regard appeared incomprehensible. But that was like my Aunt; she was consistent only in inconsistency: she spoke and acted as the mood prompted her, taking pleasure in creating a bad impression of herself, and making her eccentric manners the cover of much real tenderness.

After tea that first night she said a thing which was full of pathos. We had drawn round the fire, the

lamp was not lit, and the pleasant glow of the fire played over the low-ceilinged room.

"How long have you lived here?" she asked my father.

"A little better than twenty years."

"And you like it?"

"I didn't at first, but I do now. At first I thought the house gloomy, but now I've grown quite fond of it. It's more than a house now—it's a home."

"I never had a home."

"Why, what do you mean, Tabitha?"

"What I say. We always lived in lodgings. Sometimes they were good, but oftener bad. I always hated the furniture. I suppose it was because it wasn't mine. I've always slept in a hired bed. But there, what did it matter? I daresay I slept as well as if I'd bought it."

The words created a singular picture of a kind of life essentially forlorn, nomadic, comfortless. I saw my father slip his arm round her shoulders, as though he meant to say silently, "Well, you've got a home now."

"Ah, Bob," she said softly, "you don't know all I've gone through since we were kids together."

And then, as if ashamed of her emotion, she sat bolt upright, and said in her most arbitrary manner. "For goodness' sake, why don't you light the lamp? I should think some of you had work you wanted to do, and as for that boy, he ought to be at his lessons."

The next morning it might be said she formally took possession of the house. She insisted on tying my father's cravat after a method of her own, and I believe she brushed his hair, which exhibited a quite unfamiliar flatness of surface. She objected to the milk at breakfast as being deficient in cream, and, hav-

ing caught the unlucky milkman on the doorstep, addressed to him a flood of invective, which sent him scuttling down the street in speechless wrath. She informed my mother that it was her duty to sit in an easy chair before the fire, and not spend all the time in the occupations of her kitchen.

"You needn't think because I pay a pound a week I'm going to sit still and do nothing," she remarked. "I've always lived an active life, and I can't be idle. Heaven knows there's plenty wants doing in this house, and I'm going to do it."

To my mother's timid protest she answered, "O, I know the sort of woman you are. You've been put upon. Because you're always ready to do everything, the men let you do it. That's just like them, great lazy creatures, who think they're lords of creation. I'll Lord them!" She snorted contemptuously. The embryo of all the modern feminist movement might have been detected in my Aunt's snort.

She must have employed the whole of that first morning in what she called "tidying" my father's study. When he came home he found his table neatly arranged, half his MSS. mislaid, and his favourite books shoved into any spaces on the shelves which happened to fit them, irrespective of their subjects. His own peculiar chair was moved to the other side of the fireplace, and was occupied by my mother. When she rose to yield it to him, my Aunt at once interposed.

"No, you don't," she exclaimed. "That's the most comfortable chair in the room, and as for you, Bob, you've had it long enough. You must learn not to be selfish."

"I'm sure I'm not selfish, Tabitha."

"Not as God made you, perhaps. But when a woman sets to work to make a man comfortable she

pretty soon checkmates God's intention. You've been spoiled, Bob."

"I'm sure I didn't know it."

"Of course not. That's what no man knows. It takes a woman like me to make him know."

"You're certainly very well calculated to do it," said my father drily.

"That's because I've learned my lesson. I began by waiting hand and foot on Shanley. And I know now he would have been a much better man if I'd made him wait on me."

My father glanced quizzically at my Aunt's brooch, as if he thought the melancholy gentleman with the Dundreary whiskers might have something to say on that subject, which would have conveyed a different impression.

My Aunt caught the glance and snorted.

"It's my opinion there's been too much *Shanleying* in this house. It was time I came."

"As a messenger of Providence, eh?"

"As a sister who knows how to deal with her brother, having wintered and summered him long ago, before he found a good kind little woman to humour him in all his selfish ways. So there!"

My father laughed, and my Aunt's grim face relaxed, and her eyes gleamed.

Strange as it may seem, I am sure my father enjoyed this and many similar encounters with my Aunt. His life had gone so long upon a dead level that it had lost vivacity. Just outside Barton there was flat country, through which the coach-road ran for five miles, and the drivers used to say that the dead level took more strength out of their horses than ten miles of hilly country. My father's dull uniformity of life had drained his strength, and perhaps he felt that a little hill country of lively exercise which called out

his wits in argument, was not a bad thing for him. Certainly my Aunt provided him with plenty of exercise. He was allowed to take nothing for granted, he was made to fight for his hand on the smallest matters. She was always the big sister who wanted to order about the young brother, and did so without the least regard for the changes which the years had wrought. If he substituted authority for argument she would crush him with the remark, "Don't think you can get over me that way. Why I knew you when you wore petticoats!" The mere association of petticoats with my father, who had acquired a good deal of the schoolmaster's dictatorial primness of manner, created a comic picture which always dissolved contention in laughter. Of course it wasn't fair argument—even a little boy like myself could perceive that—but it was my Aunt's illogical and triumphant bludgeon, and I have since discovered that it is a form of argument much patronised by even the best women.

If my Aunt took my father and mother in hand after this fashion, it will be easily perceived that she was not likely to let me alone.

On the first Wednesday afternoon after her arrival, I came downstairs as usual in all the glory of my white cotton gloves and glazed hat, ready to pay calls, and, if possible, meet Lucille. My Aunt saw me coming, and glared at me in severe disapproval.

"Land's sake, what is this I see? Can it be our little Robert?"

"If you please, Aunt, I'm going out to pay calls."

"He's going to pay calls," she mimicked. "Here, you come with me."

She took me by the shoulders and pushed me into the room where my mother sat beside the fire mending socks.

"What do you think of *this*, Susan?" she said, with a most disparaging emphasis on the *this*.

"O, is it Robert you mean? Why, I'm sure he looks very nice."

"Yes, as nice a little jackanapes as ever came out of a bandbox. I declare in all my days I never saw such a sissy."

"What's a sissy?" I said.

"It's a person they've no use for in America."

"But what is it, Aunt?"

"A sissy is a girl dressed up like a boy. He's a girl in trousers, if you want to know."

"Then I'm sure I'm not that," I cried indignantly.

"Well, you look it, and what's the use of being one thing if you look another?"

"He's dressed as I wish him to be dressed," said my mother in her most dignified voice.

"Now, Susan, don't be foolish," she went on relentlessly. "If God had meant you to have a girl I suppose He'd have given you one, but if He's given you a boy the least you can do is to dress him like a boy. Look at his hair: it's yards too long. Look at those ridiculous white gloves; no manly boy wants to wear gloves. And what's he want paying calls anyway? He ought to be bird's-nesting or robbing orchards at his age. If you want him to be a girl put him in petticoats at once and be done with it. But if you mean him to be a boy, which I suppose is what God intended, for God's sake let him be one."

"I like his hair long," said my mother. "He has such beautiful curls it would be a shame to cut them off."

"Ask him if he likes them. Ask him what the other boys in the town think of them. I'll be bound they make fun of them—unless English boys are very different from American boys."

This struck home. I remembered too many occasions when Taddy Walker and his gang had offered to introduce me to the barber.

"I'm sure I don't want my hair long," I said boldly.

"O, you don't? Well, we'll see about that. No time like the present, Robert."

And with that she sat down, placed me between her knees, and seized a pair of scissors.

"You shan't do it," cried my mother, who was now very flushed and indignant. "You are too interfering, Tabitha, and I will not permit it."

"Well, I think Robert said he wanted his hair cut, and after all it's *his* hair, you know."

"Yes, please, Aunt. I think I'd rather have it short."

She raised the scissors, and one by one my curls fell on the floor. My mother gathered them up as they fell, and her tears fell on them. Those tears made me very uncomfortable, but my strongest desire just then was not to be a sissy, and I felt my Aunt was right.

"Now, go and look at yourself in the glass," said my Aunt.

I ran upstairs and saw in the glass a boy I did not know; and then for the first time my mind misgave me. It was such a peaked little face I saw, with eyes that looked too big for it, and my head was so much smaller that I preferred myself as a sissy. And then, worst of all, there came to me the thought that Lucille wouldn't know me, and certainly would despise me.

In that moment I hated my 'Aunt Tabitha, and wished she had never come to Barton.

CHAPTER IV

MY AUNT TAKES A HAND

My Aunt created the first genuine revolution in my life. On the day when she cut my curls off she took violent possession of me, and practically usurped the rights of parentage. I was hers by right of theft, and she proceeded to justify her claim.

I can see now that this was a very good thing for me, although at the time it frequently bore the aspect of a malicious providence. I don't think I was ever really what my Aunt called "a sissy": but I am quite sure that I was not a normal boy. I was a lonely child who had drawn the colour of my life exclusively from mature persons; I was the product of an intellectual forcing-house, and, as a natural result, I was precocious, and proud of my precocity. My Aunt was quite right when she said that at my age I ought to have been bird's-nesting or robbing orchards; instead of which I was going about in white cotton gloves, making love to little girls. Even my reading was all wrong. I had never discovered *Robinson Crusoe*, nor the incredible ingenuities of *The Swiss Family Robinson*. I had never entertained the least desire to be a bandit, a pirate, a highwayman, or to live upon a desert island. Every natural boy is moved by these blood-thirsty ambitions; they mark the first crude bubblings up of the life-force that is within him. So far as I remember the only two works of fiction with which I was acquainted were *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and a sickly kind of story called *The Wide Wide*

World. From the first my mother used to read aloud the death of Eva, and the most thrilling episode I recall in the other was a dreadful accident to the white stockings of a young lady who fell into a muddy ditch.

"You've spoiled him," said my mother sadly, as she looked on my little cropped head. "He looks like a little shorn lamb."

"Well, hav'n't lambs a right to be shorn?" retorted my Aunt. "Do you think you can keep them lambs forever?"

And there, I suppose lay the gist of the whole matter. My mother didn't want me to grow up; my father didn't see that I was making futile efforts to grow up. They were both content that I should sit forever on my stool beside the fire, and cram myself with books, and never get a glimpse of real life, not even in the pages of Byron. Then came my Aunt, with her plain commonsense and satiric tongue, and with her the stinging wind of the outside world. It was wonderful how in a single month she dominated the entire house. The quality of the milk improved, and the butcher was made to confess a long system of delinquencies in the matter of short weight. She bought furniture, and turned her bedroom into a sitting-room, and it became a sort of throne-room from which imperial edicts went forth.

"We'll have no more *Shanleying*," became her formula. "To Shanley" was a verb which expressed all that was weak, loose, easy-going, and ineffective. Our little maid grasped its import, and my Aunt's foot upon the stair filled her with a fearful alacrity. And yet with it all there was mixed so much of genuine humour, and such a quality of perverse kindness, that revolt was impossible.

I am ashamed to confess that I soon came to pre-

fer my Aunt's room to my father's study—a defecation which I am quite sure must have caused my mother much sorrow. A boy can be very brutal to his mother without knowing it, and it was one of the first results of my Aunt's treatment of me that I began to display my personal tastes without the least thought of their effect on others.

The fire always burned brighter in my Aunt's room, and it was warm and sunny there. And then I had heard the views of my father and mother expressed so many times that I knew them by rote, whereas my Aunt's views had all the pungency of novelty. She never talked about books but about men and things and travel, and that big strange world of clamorous cities beyond the sea where so many years of her life had been spent. It was a strange, almost miraculous widening of the horizon, for a boy who had never been outside Barton. It was as though a barrier of grey hills suddenly sank in dust, and I beheld the true vastness of things, roads running into flaming sunsets, and piled-up cities, and far-off seas, which filled the air with a dim thunder of immense waves.

Of course she soon turned my small heart inside out, and got at all my secrets. She learned about Taddy Walker, and Lucille, and the oppressive grandeur of the Overbergs.

"So she didn't know you, eh? Rides about in a carriage and despises you? Well, you wait a bit, and I'll show her!"

What she did I don't know, but I have reason to think she opened a large account at Overberg's bank. I have a distinct memory of seeing her come down the steps of the Bank one spring afternoon, with her most stately stride, and the banker standing at the door, bowing in the most polite manner, and waving his big fleshy hands to and fro in a sort of benediction. A

week later Mrs. Overberg called—she really did—and left my mother flushed with surprise, and my Aunt grimly triumphant.

"I told you I'd show 'em," she remarked, "and I have."

"I'm sure I was never so upset in my life," said my mother. "I had just had the fire made up, when I heard the carriage stop, and such a knock at the door. And she came in, and sat down as if she'd known me all my life, and said she'd often noticed what a nice little boy I'd got. She was most pleasant and condescending——"

"Condescending indeed," snorted my Aunt.

"Well, so she was, Tabitha. You don't know how much it means because you hav'n't lived long enough in Barton."

"I know very well why she came though. Did you really think she came to see you? Not a bit of it. She came to see me."

"Well, I did wonder why she came. Perhaps that explains it," said my mother timidly.

"Of course. I'm a newcomer, and in good society it's always customary to call on newcomers, if they have enough money."

"Do you think that was really why, Tabitha?"

And at that humble question my Aunt suddenly relaxed into tenderness, as was her habit.

"Why, no, you dear foolish little woman. I guess she'd heard about you a long time, and wanted to know you, and just made me an excuse to call. But don't you talk about condescending. You're worth a hundred of her, if you only knew it."

Of course my Aunt was not exactly truthful in that statement, but when an untruth gives so much happiness as this did, I should not wonder if God prefers it to the truth. My mother's face, abrim with gentle

pride and half-tearful with the sense of unexpected appreciation was worth a lie of such moderate dimensions. The curious thing is that child as I was I knew it was a lie. My ear had caught the phrase "If they have enough money" and this was my first lesson on the power of money. I saw that it had brought down Mrs. Overberg from her stately isolation, and somehow all those sentimental preferences of poverty to wealth which I had imbibed from the poets appeared to me insincere, and not in accord with the facts of life.

One fruit of my Aunt's interference in our affairs was that something like friendly relations were established with the Overbergs. I was invited to a party at the banker's on Lucille's birthday, and of course saw Lucille. She came to me with the prettiest air of welcome, but I was swift to notice that she extended just the same kind of welcome to everybody else, and my heart was hot with disappointment and jealousy. This formal meeting was not at all the same thing as the furtive tryst under the old Town-hall. Did she wish me to forget it? Once only her eyes met mine in a sweet look of memory. It was brief as a glint of April sunshine on a flower. It was not until almost the close of the evening that her hand sought mine and she whispered, "I'm going to be sent away."

"What for, Lucille?"

"To school in London."

And then in a small troubled voice, "*She* doethn't love me. And besides, I've not been very well. But I'll not forget you, Robert, I won't indeed——"

And then Mrs. Overberg, proud and dark, bore down upon us like a cloud and swept her away. I did not know that it would be years before I saw Lucille again. Nor did I comprehend that in that moment I had set up a shrine in my heart, bearing the image of

her, before which an unquenchable lamp of love was lit. In the heat and haste of youth I sometimes forgot that it was there, but the lamp never went out. The day came when I entered my shrine again, and found the lamp still burning—but that was long after. The only reminder of that inner shrine was the frail whisper of that childish voice, "I'll not forget you," which never left me; a kind of wind-voice, sweet and mellow, floating high above my life, breathed through my dreams, thin as an echo, but delicately clear, insistent, truthful——. Not always a voice even; a perfume suggesting a presence—the exhalation of a sanctity, the breathing of dim-laden flowers in an unseen garden, behind thick hedges, which border a dark hard road——. And the road was Life, and the fragrance that blew over it was the memory of Lucille.

For a long time after this—it must have been a year or two—nothing stands out very clearly but the indomitable figure of my Aunt. She announced her intention of staying in Barton until I was ready to make a start in life, and then—well, she would see what ought to be done for me. During all that time she fought incessant battles with my parents over me, and over the sort of life she meant me to live. She would hear nothing of my father's plan to make me a clergyman, nor of my mother's to make me a poet. She had the poorest opinion of each of these vocations.

"A clergyman indeed, a man dressed in white petticoats with a coloured bedgown on his back, a figure of fun—no, thank you, my nephew isn't going to be that, and don't you think it," she would cry.

"But there are Bishops, wouldn't you like him to be a Bishop?" interposed my father.

"And wear gaiters—that's worse than petticoats."

"But it's a great and sacred calling."

"Fiddlesticks! So's bricklaying. And it's a sight more honest than getting your living by talking about things you don't understand, and no one else understands either."

"I believe you're a pagan, Tabitha," said my father severely.

"I've no doubt of it. Most of the people who do the real work of the world are pagans."

"Have you no religion, Tabitha?"

"Land's sake, of course I have. I'm one of the most religious women alive, and that's why I don't want clergymen poking their noses into my affairs. My religion is doing the best you can for yourself and everybody else, and if that isn't religion, I'd like to know what is?"

Her view of poetry was equally singular.

"If Robert's going to be a poet nothing you can do will stop him, and if he isn't, nothing you can do will make him one," was her verdict. "Flowers grown in pots soon die. The sweetest flowers are those that grow outdoors in the wind and rain. You can't stop *their* growing for they're doing what God meant them to do. But any one can shove your pot over, and kill the flower. You want to make the boy a Pot-poet."

This was a very scornful epithet, which I did not forget. Certainly I didn't want to be a Pot-poet.

"Poetry is doing things, too," continued my Aunt. "Nobody writes anything great unless *he's* great."

And then, in her comfortable room at the back of the house, to which she invited me on the pretence that I could learn my lessons better there, she would talk to me about the great crude country she had left, and all the fierce poetry of its struggle after unity. She loved to go back to the days of the Civil War, and read old papers filled with tragic accounts of victories

and defeats. She would read these accounts to me with a thrilling declamation which she had learned from the theatre, and at such times her gaunt figure seemed to swell into tragic dignity. She read the stories of eager boys rushing out of Yale and Harvard to suffer and die on dreadful battlefields, of mothers giving son after son without murmur to the great cause, of towns and cities where there was no home that did not mourn its dead, and of the continual wild onward rush of these battling hosts with torn banners and the roar of guns. Over all loomed Titanic figures, Sherman, Grant, Sheridan. They moved along the clouds of war, smoke-stained, blood-stained, sweating the blood of an intolerable agony, but fire-crowned with an indomitable hope. Wild march-songs rose to greet them, the immense glee of men impassioned, multitudes of men, whose voice was like the roaring of great waves. And a little apart from it all, like a god, crucified, mishandled by ferocious hatreds, lonely on his Calvary, Lincoln—his heart torn by the vultures, his brow seamed with care, but his eyes fixed on far-off things, his face shining with the splendour of a deathless faith.

My Aunt had seen him once when she was a young girl, soon after her marriage. She had heard him speak, and she talked of that experience in such hushed tones as men use when they speak of a divine visitation. She remembered scarcely more than a phrase or two of all he said; it was the voice she remembered, the man himself, the pathos of his homeliness, his simplicity, his sincerity. She said he had the most tired-looking face she ever saw, and the saddest eyes. The crowd swayed round him, most of them cheering, a few hostile, but he did not appear to notice them at all, or even know that they were there. He looked beyond them and above them, wrapt in the wonder of

his vision—a man separate from all other men by an awful destiny. The most thoughtless and even the most hostile became conscious of something mystic in him before he finished speaking; and yet they felt him to be one of themselves, very human, very much in need of love, and hungry for it with the hunger of a big heart that had never been completely satisfied.

"Shanley and I found ourselves holding each other's hands like children while he spoke, and we both cried without knowing why, and for a week after we didn't quarrel once," she said. "It seemed as if the world had suddenly grown too big for quarrels."

I think this was the only time I heard her mention her unhappy husband with any tenderness. It was a curious tribute to Lincoln's influence that the best moment these two ill-mated creatures had known was his unconscious gift to them.

And then, as we talked, she would tell me about the life of Lincoln—his forlorn childhood, his harsh upbringing, his passionate struggles for knowledge, the hopeless drudgeries of his lot so faithfully encountered, so patiently borne, and at last so triumphantly overcome. And behind the picture of the man himself other pictures streamed vague and strange; the wild unknown land, the forests and the rivers, the thin flame of a new civilisation burning its way into the aboriginal darkness, man slowly advancing torch in hand to the creation of states, cities, and empire.

It is impossible to record how these pictures affected me. As I look back it seems to me that I was like a cabinboy or a stowaway, hidden in the dark bowels of a ship, who suddenly comes on deck and sees the fulness of the ocean. There it heaved and throbbed, sparkling, illimitable, roofed by stars and clouds—and all the bigness of the world broke on me like a revelation. And this, I think, was just what my

Aunt wanted me to feel. She saw my father living his narrow life, subdued to the littleness of the elements in which he worked; she saw my mother with all her fine-fibred tender heroism pouring out her life-force on pots and dishes—and she saw me, with some signs of cleverness, I may assume, likely to sink into the same dim obscurity. She determined to save me, and she did so by making me conscious of world-wideness. She touched that spirit of adventure which lies latent in every boy's heart, and she did it in the best way by making me realise what a big thing big men make of life. And she chose the biggest man she knew, and the one she most loved and revered, to teach her lesson. This gaunt youth of the log cabin and the river-raft, with his strong rough hands, his power of labour, his primeval efficiency, towered over me like a god, and made me bitterly ashamed of my paltriness. And yet he invigorated me too. If a man so conceived in the womb of hardship, so confronted with malignant circumstance, denied almost everything but bare life, could become so great, could do so much, might not I do something too? At all events I had seen the sea, and could not go back to the ship's hold.

This last sentence reminds me of something which has a sort of pathos in it as I recall it. There was a boy in my father's school who went to the sea-side one summer for a holiday, and when he came back he used to show us the spots of salt stain upon his clothes made by the sea. Once, as a special favour, he allowed me to touch them, and my finger thrilled as though the sea itself leapt beneath my touch. I used to walk as close to him as I could, just to feel those salt stains; he was to me a hero; he had had a great adventure, he had seen the sea!

Much in the same way my Aunt appeared to me a person of infinite adventures. She also had seen the

sea—the big tumbling waves of life—while I had dwelt beside a little rush-grown pool. Touching her clothes I touched romance; the ocean wind had blown through them, and the sun of the new world had shone on them. The very places and cities she named had a large-voweled music—Baltimore, Delaware, Ohio; they sang upon the ear. That they conveyed no precise image to my mind mattered not at all. They did something better, something rarer—they filled the chords of my imagination with exquisite vibrations. As I ran along the streets my mind made a rhythm of them, to which my feet kept time. When the spring days came I used to go toward sunset to a little bare hill, just outside the town, on whose southern slopes the primroses and violets were thick, that I might feel the fresher wind of that unknown world that lay beyond the setting sun. “Baltimore, Delaware, Ohio,” sang the wind in large cadences. It had blown across these very places, it had the rush of rivers and the sound of forests in it, and the deep undertones of roaring hosts and loud guns on blood-red battlefields. And the sun was travelling toward them; he would shine upon the cities and the rivers, and the never-ending forests. “O, the great world—should I ever see it, ever be a part of it?” So my thoughts cried in me as I saw the great cloud-Armadas sail out, each fire-topped, rose-coloured, into the vastness, leaving me a lonely little derelict, with the grey night gathering round me.

My childhood was passing from me. I was conscious of a new sap of life that rose in me. I saw myself growing lean and awkward, shy and bold, and felt my blood fermenting with curious sensations. Books had ceased to interest me. I dreamed strange dreams, and woke in fear. My parents seemed to have receded from me; they moved ghostly on the far edge

of life, and their voices sounded thin and vague. My Aunt appeared the only real person whom I knew. She watched me with shrewd eyes, fed my mind with the bitter-sweet of her ironic speech, angered me, jeered at me, stimulated me, and through all never failed to make me feel she loved me.

"You're a little fool," she would say. "No—you needn't be angry—you'll get over it. It's a phase. All wise men have gone through it, and the only wise men are those who have dared to be fools."

"Teach me to be wise, then," I retorted.

"Bless the boy, how do you know I can do that? I am just a foolish old woman myself. I've made a pretty poor thing of my own life. I daresay you'll do the same. I never heard of a Shenstone yet who amounted to a row of beans."

"I'm going to make something of my life," I said proudly.

"Are you? Well, every cock crows in the morning. Crow away, it'll do you good. But it's a long day to sunset."

"Aunt, won't you help me to do things—not to be a fool?"

"Of course I will, my dear. That's what I'm here for. But you'll learn some day that the only person who can do much for you is yourself."

Half of these enigmatic speeches I did not understand; but the half which I did understand braced me like a tonic. I felt that she expected me to do things, and is there any finer stimulus than the knowledge that some one believes in you? It may be only one's Aunt, it may be any one; but no one ever climbed a yard above the mire without some one to assure him he could do it. I believe that most of the lives that fail, fail through dispraise, or through the lack of encouragement. That was no doubt why my father failed—

perhaps why his race had failed. It was part of my Aunt's wisdom to make this very failure a whip of shame laid on my back. She never would have said it openly, but in her whole attitude towards me she made me feel that it lay with me to redeem the name I bore, and that some day I might do it.

Yes, my childhood was passing from me. I began to have strange thoughts about life, to put strange questions to myself, to indulge in long aimless soliloquies. I was like a prisoner in a half-dark room, feeling round for the latch of a door I could not find. I wanted the door to open, and yet I dreaded the moment when it would. I dreamed a great deal, but there was one dream that was recurrent. It was always the same: A great level land, over which a mist lay, and somewhere in the mist the noise of feet, and wheels, and faint bells, and running rivers. My great anxiety was to see the mist lift, to know what really lay behind it. My fear was that it would lift when I was not there to see it, that I might die and never know what it concealed.

Well, the mist was lifting all too fast, if I had but known it. The hour was not far distant now when it would roll up like a curtain, to descend no more. That sweetest hour of day, when all the world lies robed in fine-spun tissue of shimmering silk and silver greyness, is all too brief; it passes silently; the hot sun beats down in hard radiance upon the long, steep road: and how much must happen before the mist returns, folding all sound and movement into final silence?

CHAPTER V

DEALINGS WITH MR. WART

IF I were writing a strict chronological history I should have to give some detailed account of those years which form the bridge between childhood and youth; but I am not doing anything of the kind. My life presents itself to me rather as a series of spiritual episodes. One episode closed on the day when my Aunt returned to America to settle some of her affairs and I was left to complete my education under my father's guidance.

The narrow world had suddenly closed itself down on me again. The only difference was that my father had come to think that I was predestined for the literary life. If he was disappointed in this conclusion, he never said so. He quietly put himself at the disposal of my ambitions, although there must have been times when they appeared to him debatable and absurd. He allowed me to use my Aunt's room as my own private study, and there I made my first experiments in the art of letters. They were poor enough rubbish, no doubt, but to me they were all touched with the light of wonder. I wrote poems, stories, and even a drama on the subject of Madame Pompadour, her high-sounding name being, I think, the chief provocation to my mind. And as each page was written, it was duly read to my parents, who were expected to give me unstinted applause.

Foolish, happy days—how strange they appear to me now, in the long perspective! I can see the sunny

room, looking out upon the garden; the home-made bookshelves which I had nailed along the walls; the old kitchen table at which I wrote; and I can smell the acrid atmosphere created by the leaky paraffin lamp which I used at night. Early in the morning before school, I wrote verses there, which I fondly believed were of immortal mintage; late at night I composed stories, which had no relation whatever to anything in actual life. My mother, tiptoeing at the door, would call me to breakfast; my father, more positive, would enter the room at night, and insist that I go to bed. I felt the stimulus of their pride in me, and felt myself established as a genius. I have never since had an audience so kind, or critics so credulously sympathetic.

By some strange luck I actually found a local printer named Wart, who believed in me enough to print my poems. He was a bald-headed squint-eyed man, who had preserved through many misfortunes an undisciplined love of poetry. The local paper was issued from his office, and in it appeared from time to time some of his own verses, which displayed a touching ignorance of metre, and an almost total disregard of rhyme. The very worst verse I ever read was his: it was a description of Gethsemane, which ran thus:

The Great I Am no sooner said,
Their hearts with terror filled;
They all upon their backs were laid,
To all appearance killed.

On every Church festival he considered it his duty to come out with appropriate verse, and he was also great in the composition of verses on funerals, sudden deaths, and local accidents.

Armed with a small green-covered sixpenny pamphlet, which purported to explain all the various methods

by which books might be published, I visited Mr. Wart one afternoon, with the startling proposition that he should publish my poems. I think he was engaged in the throes of composition at the time, for there was a large inkstain on his forehead, and his air was wild.

"Pomes!" he cried, "pomes, pomes"—and went on repeating the word in a helpless sort of way, as though the word were new to him.

"Poems and a one-act drama," I said encouragingly.

"Drama too! Bless my soul! Now I never could write drama. The unities, you know, and all that."

"I've read your poems in the paper."

"Yes?—They've been generally read, and I may say admired. They've been very helpful. I'll read you my last."

He proceeded to read me some dreadful doggerel, which I pretended to admire. The sixpenny pamphlet said an author should always try to conciliate his publisher, and I made a most conscientious attempt to follow its instructions.

"Of course you're young. You've not had experience. It's not to be expected you could write like that."

I humbly confessed that I had no such hope.

"But the question is, Have you got the Afflatus? The Afflatus, you understand."

I boldly professed that I had. The sixpenny book said you must not be too modest in the presence of a publisher, or he would take advantage of you.

"Well, I'll look over them. But, look here, why don't you publish them in my paper?"

"I want a book. A real book."

"Ah, the dreams of youth—yes—I had them once. I see. I may say I sympathise."

"Then, you will publish them, Mr. Wart?"

He rubbed his inky fingers over his forehead, pro-

ducing modifications of the existing stains, and glimmered at me through his spectacles.

"I don't know about that. No, I really don't. This is a most unusual circumstance, quite new in my experience. Well, I'll see. Come again in a week."

I sat up late that night studying the sixpenny *Guide to Authors*. From it I learned that young writers sometimes paid for the publication of their first books, and sometimes publishers paid them, thereby buying out all their rights forever. I found that both these methods were sternly denounced as injudicious and unfair. I saw that I must act warily with Mr. Wart. It appeared there were "bandit publishers," who accumulated fortunes by buying up the works of promising authors before the said authors had realised their own worth. Mr. Wart certainly did not look a man of that kind; but who could tell what dark designs he meditated? What if he should steal my poems, publish them as his own, and laugh at my claim to have written them? It was evident that the writer of the sixpenny *Guide* had the poorest possible opinion of publishers. He had a very stinging paragraph on the fifteen pounds which John Milton received for *Paradise Lost*. He intimated that he himself was an important person in the realm of letters, who had suffered so much from the malignity of publishers that he dare not reveal his name, lest a worse thing should happen to him.

During the next few days my mind was completely obsessed by Mr. Wart. I rehearsed a number of speeches which I meant to make to him, in which I maintained the rights of authors with unflinching pugnacity and complete triumph. *The Guide to Authors* stated, as a final opinion, that the only just method of publication was for the publisher to bear all the expense of publication, and to pay the author royalties

on sales. In this recommendation I thoroughly concurred; and straightway I plunged into a labyrinth of arithmetic with astonishing results. If I could have consulted my father, I should have had more confidence in my figures; but this was just what I did not wish to do. I intended my book to be a complete surprise to him.

At the end of the week I presented myself to Mr. Wart, who came out of his office looking inkier than ever.

"Well, my boy," he began, "I've read your pomes. So has Mrs. Wart. You don't know Mrs. Wart, do you?"

I confessed that I did not.

"A fine woman, my boy, and a real critic. Always reads my pomes before I print 'em. She might have written pomes herself, but domestic pressure, you know. In short, too many babies."

This was interesting but not helpful.

"Does she like my poems?" I asked.

"She does and she does not. She thinks they have promise, real promise. But she misses the religious note, my boy. She's been used to that in my work. And she doesn't like that drama about Madame Pompadour. Says she was a bad woman, and shouldn't be wrote about."

"She was interesting——"

"Interestin', yes, but not moral, you know. In short, not fit for publication. Best forgotten."

This was my first experience of the perpetual conflict between art and morals, and I listened in some dismay as Mr. Wart went on to develope the views of Mrs. Wart.

"Mrs. Wart likes simple pomes, about things everybody understands. Bible pomes—people like those too. Sunday schools like 'em. Home and hearth, you

know. But drama, no. Drama's a drug on the market. In short, it isn't read."

"Then you won't print my poetry?" I said with a terrible sinking of my heart.

"O, no, now, I didn't say that. Indeed, I've got a plan to suggest. How old are you, my boy?"

"I'm fifteen."

"Well, how would it be if I printed your pomes as by *The Boy Poet of Barton*? 'Alliteration's artful aid,' you know. Would attract attention."

"But without my name?"

"Well, I wouldn't mind your initials. By R. S., *The Boy Poet of Barton*—that would do, I think. Makes people curious, you know."

I didn't like the suggestion at all. For weeks I had gloated over an imagined page, which bore in large capitals the name of ROBERT SHENSTONE. R. S. appeared a very poor substitute. Besides *The Boy Poet of Barton* sounded ridiculous. I had got beyond the persecutions of Taddy Walker and his gang, but I could conceive that there were plenty of boys who would utter that phrase with their tongues in their cheeks, and make me exceedingly uncomfortable.

"I would like my full name, sir."

"Very natural. I understand. Thirst for fame, and all that—I've felt it myself. But we can print the name in full afterward—when you're famous. And then there's another thing—how would you like to dedicate your book to me? Just a few words, saying how you'd read my verses for years, and been helped by them?"

"But I haven't read them—that is not all of them," I added evasively.

"But you can. I've got them all pasted down in a book. Mrs. Wart pastes them down for me."

"And then there's the title, my boy. You just say *Poems*. That won't do at all. People like titles—something suggestive. And I've got a title for you—*Songs at Eventide*. How do you like that?"

By this time I was too confused to have any opinions at all. What with Mrs. Wart's objection to my drama, and Mr. Wart's ideas of morality, and the mysterious tastes and preferences of the public which they professed to understand, and of which I knew nothing, it seemed an incredible thing that any book ever got printed at all. But I was shrewd enough to see that if I wanted my poetry printed it must be in Mr. Wart's way and not mine. And I also had a dim consciousness of something pathetic in Mr. Wart's desire for a dedication. But his idea of a title seemed absurd. *Songs at Eventide* by a boy of fifteen!

"It's a good catchy title," went on Mr. Wart, with innocent pride in his suggestion. "It was Mrs. Wart who thought of it. Gives a kind of picture to the mind—old graveyard at sunset, old church, all peaceful, Gray's *Elegy* you know, 'the ploughman homeward plods his weary way'—in short, *Eventide*."

I began to perceive a gentle obstinacy in Mr. Wart against which I was powerless. He had evidently thought out a complete plan, and meant to insist upon it. It was with timidity I suggested the important question of terms.

"Terms?—Well, you leave that to me. I'm going to make this a personal affair—in short, I'll consider myself your partner! Honoured to print a book of poetry— And by the bye, you don't want your father to know, I understand."

"I want to surprise him."

"A very noble idea. I may say I sympathise with it. So, I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll have the proofs at my house, and you can come round and go over

them with Mrs. Wart. She will be of great assistance to you. If there's one branch of literature Mrs. Wart does thoroughly understand it's Poetry, my boy."

I could say nothing against this, for by this time it was clear to me that Mr. Wart practically intended to publish my poems at his own expense, and that the only return he was likely to get was a dedication which gratified his vanity. Unless, of course, I became famous, which I fully expected to be, and then Mr. Wart's name would go down to posterity linked with mine like a sort of double-star! An absurd dream, no doubt, but what would life be without the dreams which we only call absurd when their glory has burned down into dead ash? They are true and real at the time, they communicate their glow to heart and brain, they put music into our feet and set us dancing over hard roads, and what more can you ask? Perhaps when the Psalmist said we pass our days as a tale that is told, what he meant was that we all have our romantic visions which touch the common day with glory, and that life would be a very poor thing indeed without them.

In due course I was introduced to Mrs. Wart, and to her numerous household. I found her to be a large slatternly person, much cumbered with babies who were so alike in size that one could only suppose they were all triplets, or, at least, twins. They appeared to spend most of their time in climbing over her, as though she were an Alp, and they perpetually in search of new coigns of vantage, from which a wider view of the world was possible. The house in which they lived was a poor affair on the outskirts of the town, with a small garden in front of it, which might have grown flowers if it had not been given over to perpetual experiments in the art of making mud-pies.

Whenever a visitor entered the gate the little Warts fell upon him in a mass, like puppies, and took it as a point of honour to impede his progress to the door by every means in their power. On such occasions Mrs. Wart, who appeared to be permanently engaged in "turning out" the front bedroom, would appear at its window, and address distracted remonstrances to her offspring which stimulated rather than restrained their zeal.

"Dear little things, they are so full of life," was the only apology she ever offered for these unwelcome demonstrations.

The sole time of peace in the house was when the children were abed; even then one or two of the "dear little things" would insist on sleeping in her arms; and in this cramped position she would endeavour to use a large blue pencil in the correction of her husband's proofs—and mine.

I think she had taught school or been a nursery governess at some primeval period of her past before she married Mr. Wart; at all events she was a great stickler for grammar, and a severe opponent of all unusual words. She had somehow got hold of the notion, which she attributed to Wordsworth, that the more commonplace the language the better was it suited to poetry. I could have borne this, had she not carried her ideas of poetry to the length of insisting that every poem should have its moral, in pursuit of which theory she appended absurd moral tags to all my most cherished verses.

"The poet should be a teacher, shouldn't he, Charles?" she would say to her husband.

"Certainly, my dear."

"I'm sure you've always been so earnest in trying to do good by your poetry, haven't you, Charles?"

"Indeed, I have. I have had many letters from the

clergy saying how much they appreciated my efforts to raise the tone of the community."

"There! You hear that, Robert; and let Mr. Wart be your example. Now you've a poem here on Alexander the Great, but you don't teach any moral. Alexander died of drunkenness, and you ought to say so. The world ought to know it. Here are two lines which I've made myself which you must add to your poem—

No wonder all his glory's shrunk,
For this great hero died when drunk.

Now that gives just the right touch—it makes the moral plain——"

Here one of the children fell off her lap, and there was such a commotion that she lost her blue pencil, and by that accident alone these highly moral lines were omitted from my book.

This sort of thing happened every night. She must have spent her days thinking up insane emendations to my verses. And it was much worse when we came to the Dedication. No adjective was good enough to express the genius of Mr. Wart.

"Mr. Wart is a great poet, though he is born to blush unseen," she declared.

It would certainly have made the greatest poet blush to have been labelled with half the adulatory phrases that she wished to lavish on Mr. Wart.

She wished the dedication to contain a complete history of Mr. Wart from the cradle to maturity: the various papers he had edited, his battles for sanitary drainage, his controversy with the Rector of Barton over a surpliced choir, his pure life, his example as a husband and father, and, of course, his contribution to the poetry of his age.

How we compromised the matter I don't know. I

am sure, however, we should have reached no conclusion at all but for the providential circumstance that the little Warts all fell ill with the measles, and Mrs. Wart's mind turned toward the preparation of obituary verses, of which she felt it was prudent to have a stock in hand in case of contingencies. Even then she did not altogether forget me. From the front bedroom window she addressed me in words of warning and reprobation, and even suggested the measles as a fitting theme for my muse. But since this was as close as she could get at me, I felt relatively safe, and managed to complete my book without her interference.

I should convey a totally wrong impression of these quaint people if I did not add that they were eminently loveable. Mr. Wart with his inky forehead and generous simplicity; Mrs. Wart with her tribe of children, and her blue pencil, were good angels to me. If they were irritating on account of their limitations, so are most good people; even good angels when domesticated may not always be pleasant company. Why Mr. Wart printed my poems, why Mrs. Wart let him do so, I don't know to this day. He certainly made nothing out of them, and I had nothing to give him. One negative explanation alone occurs to me; he did not know how bad they were; his was the generosity of ignorance.

Printed they were, however; a tiny book of thirty-six pages, with a neat brown cloth cover, bearing the inscription in gilt letters

SONGS AT EVENTIDE

By R. S. (The Boy Poet of Barton)

I did my best to eliminate the last phrase, but in vain. Mr. Wart's faith in the advertising value of allitera-

tion was inexpugnable. He had so set his heart on it, that I believe he would have refused to print the book without it. So I had to submit to "Alliteration's artful aid" with a perfectly justified belief that it was an aid to nothing more desirable than ridicule.

There came a proud moment when the book was in my hands, and a memorable evening when I laid it secretly on my father's table, and incontinently fled to my own room. I was fifteen. I had written a book; truly life was marvellous. I watched the summer evening draw its veils of mist over the garden, and the new moon sail up like a silver boat into the heavens, and thought of all the wonderful things I would write some day. And all the time I was listening for a footstep on the stair, wondering if my father had found the book, and what he would think of it. The suspense at last became too great, and I stole downstairs in my stockings and tiptoed to the door of the study. There sat my father writing tranquilly, and my mother mending one of my jackets, and I saw at a glance what had happened. The book was very small, and my father had pushed his papers over it, and my plot had failed. The disappointment was so keen I could have wept. And then, suddenly, while I watched, I saw my father rise, and push his pile of MSS. back, and there, exposed beyond all chance of concealment, lay the Book! He looked at it, took it up, put it down again, as if uncertain how it came there, and not sure what to do with it. Then he opened it, read the title-page, smiling a little cynically I thought—and came to the first poem. There was no mistaking that. I had read it to him many times. His tired face lit up with an extraordinary expression of surprise and love.

"Susan, come here," he said in a voice that shook. "Look at this!"

My mother dropped her mending, and stooped over the little brown book, peering at it in her short-sighted fashion.

"*Songs at Eventide, by R. S., the Boy Poet of Barton,*" read my father. "What does this mean?"

"Why it's Robert," cried my mother. "Who else can it be? He's written a book!"

"He's done more; he's got it printed!" said my father. "The young rascal! And upon my soul it doesn't look half bad either."

"And he must have put it there for you to see! I should have thought you might have *known* it was there."

"Come on, Susan. We must tell him how proud we are."

But at that word I fled. A sob rose into my throat, my heart seemed too big for my body: I could not have faced my parents at that moment. I took refuge in the garden, and heard them calling "Robert" from room to room. Presently all grew silent and I stole up to bed. Some time in the middle of the night (so it seemed to me) I woke with warm arms round my neck and my mother's tears falling on my face.

"My dear, dear boy, and you've written a book, and you didn't tell us. O, I'm so proud and so glad."

And I saw my father standing at the foot of the bed in the dim light, and thought he said, "And upon my soul, it doesn't look half bad either."

CHAPTER VI

I GO TO LONDON

MR. WART, having printed my book, including of course its dedication to himself, did his best to make it known by sending copies to all his friends, less I think for the sake of the poetry than the dedication. Among these friends was a relative of his wife, called Hopper, who kept a school for young gentlemen on the outskirts of London. I have called it a school, but he called it an Academy; and, with a similar tendency to exaggeration he called himself a Ph.D. "F. L. Hopper, Ph.D., Sole Proprietor of the Elm Tree House Academy For Young Gentlemen" was his way of describing himself and his occupation. To this gentleman Mr. Wart must have given a glowing account of my attainments, for one morning, to the intense surprise of my parents, there came a letter from Mr. Hopper, cautiously enquiring whether I would consider an offer to become Classical Master in his Academy. He explained that he was aware of my youth, but he did not consider that a drawback, since I would only have to teach very little boys the elements of Latin, and that the hours were so few that I should have plenty of time for my own studies. The last clause of his letter deserves quotation—

"I cannot offer you much money, which as you are aware is the root of all evil, but I can offer the advantages of a Christian home, in which it is the object of Mrs. Hopper and myself to develop the best instincts of the boys confided to our care by the contemplation

of the best examples, drawn from sacred and profane literature, and from these laws of conduct which Mrs. Hopper and myself desire ever to illustrate in our relation to our young charges."

There was also a postscript, by which it appeared I was not likely to incur any serious disadvantages from the root of all evil, it being so small a root that Mr. Hopper himself mentioned it apologetically.

"P. S. The remuneration is only twelve pounds per annum, with laundry included."

"Well," said my father, "it's a beginning. You might even prepare yourself for college in your spare time."

My mother's comment was, "Nonsense! He's far too young. And who's to mend the poor boy's socks, I should like to know?"

My mother argued with such unexpected energy upon this difficulty of socks that for a time she made it a supreme factor in the situation. But even she was a little bewitched by the idea of my dignity as a "Classical master"—"And he not sixteen too." If at sixteen I was a Classical master to what heights might I not attain at forty?

Never did I so much regret the absence of my Aunt as in this week of domestic debate. I was quite sure that she would never have consented to the scheme; and for my part I hated the idea of teaching. And yet I must confess I was attracted by the prospect of a new experience. The dearest dream of every boy's heart is to begin to earn money for himself. The mysterious business of earning a living looms very large to his imagination; it appears a kind of miracle that in a world so crowded a newcomer can find any kind of foothold, or get any one to pay him for anything that he can do. Actually to have money of one's own, even though it were only twelve pounds per

annum, to a boy of sixteen means the assurance of his manhood.

A second letter, in answer to certain tender queries of my mother, promised that my "wardrobe" would be the special care of Mrs. Hopper, and from this hour it became certain that I should go. The strained silence of impending separation lay heavy on the house. My father said little, but his eyes followed me wistfully. My mother came to me each night when I was in bed and hinted at the perils of the world or impressed on me the duty of caring for my health, often ending in tearful attempts to draw out my confidence and my assurance of my love for her. A new trunk stood against the window; she must have packed and unpacked it twenty times. A new suit of clothes lay neatly folded on a chair beside the bed; and, conspicuous at the top of the things in the trunk, were a dozen copies of my immortal book. Beside my own books lay my father's own beloved Virgil, annotated with many comments in his fine writing, which he had insisted on presenting to me. It would have been interesting to know what Virgil thought of the literary company which he was thus forced to keep.

In the stir and wonder of this new adventure I had only transient glimpses of its pathos; these came afterwards when at last I sat in the train on my way to London. I am on the sunset slope of life now; my heart has known the strain of many strong emotions; but I doubt if I have ever known a single hour of misery more poignant than that which I endured when Barton sunk out of sight between its quiet hills. It was a dismal January day of fine drizzling rain; my father hurried to and fro on the platform of the station with the rain glistening on his clothes; my mother hung at the door of the carriage, to the last giving me minute instructions how to avoid the snares of the

great city. Then the train moved off, and all at once I remembered the grateful words I should have said, but left unuttered; the thousand acts of kindness which had passed unnoticed; the light-heartedness of my departure in such selfish contrast with the grief around me; and what would I not have given for just one more day in Barton, just one more opportunity to show myself grateful and sympathetic? An overwhelming loneliness descended on me like a cloud. As I drew near London the cloud thickened and deepened. I looked with wonder and dismay on the sprawling outskirts of the city, the decayed and shabby houses, the prevailing squalor, the general aspect of congregated misery. All at once the train ran into what seemed a brown wall of fog, and crept on a few yards at a time, hooting hoarsely. Other trains, mere ghost-trains, slid by, with a yellow flash of lighted windows. Behind the windows ghost-faces appeared a moment and were gone. The red angry eye of a signal light glared in on me; the train stopped, shuddering; crawled on again, and screamed more hoarsely like a thing in mortal fear. In the following silence I could hear the drip of the fog from nearby eaves, and a sort of far-off murmur, as of multitudes of men complaining in a dull hopeless monotone. Then, all at once, a line of wet lamps slid past; the train stopped, and I was in London.

Out of the bedraggled crowd upon the platform a tall young man emerged, dressed in a very shabby overcoat, and a soft black hat that somehow suggested a curate out of a job. He walked up and down eyeing me suspiciously; then made a sudden dart towards me and said in a hoarse voice, "Are you Shenstone?"

"That is my name," I answered timidly.

"Thought so," said the young man. "My name's Farthing. Mathematical at Flopper's, you know."

"At Flopper's," I repeated stupidly.

"F. L. Hopper's, you know. Flopper's, for short. My eye, but ain't this a treat of a fog? It's given me a bad cold."

It appeared to me anything but a treat, and I said so.

"Best thing that could happen," said the young man cheerfully. "Flopper won't expect us for hours. Can do as we like, and say the train was late."

He then proceeded to ask me how much money I had. When I was incautious enough to inform him I had a pound, he became quite cheerful.

"Then you and me will have a spree, youngster. I rather hoped you'd have some money, for I'm stony broke."

This appeared a trifle presumptuous, but when I tried to say so the young man looked so hurt that I hadn't the heart to go on with my protest. Moreover, in spite of his shabbiness, there was a certain attraction about Mr. Farthing. He had a long cadaverous face, with a humorous mouth, and blue eyes with a gleam of wildness in them.

"Flopper doesn't feed you," he confided to me. "An egg once a week for breakfast, and porridge for supper every night. Result—always hungry. Can't sustain nature on Flopper's food. What do you say to a beefsteak and onions, and a pot of porter—I know a place. Come along, youngster."

With that he seized my arm, and dragged me off with great rapidity, talking to me all the time about the life I should lead at Flopper's.

"You won't like it," he said with a grin. "No one does. Flopper's a fraud. But his daughter ain't bad—been made love to by all the masters ever since she was a little girl. You play up to her, youngster, and she'll see papa Flopper treats you decently. That's the

ticket. I suppose Flopper got you cheap, didn't he? That's Flopper. He'd steal pennies off the eyes of a dead man."

I told him about the "root of all evil" letter. He laughed boisterously.

"I've had that letter too. It's the regular Flopper form. I think he's quite proud of it."

All this time he was walking at a great rate, dodging horses at street-crossings and pedestrians on the pavement. He stopped presently before a narrow passage, at the end of which a lamp glimmered through the fog. I had visions of a robber's den, and the recollection of an appalling story our servant told me in whispers of rooms where beds closed up and suffocated you without sound, and hands came out of trap-doors and strangled you in your sleep. I was reassured, however, by a strong smell of onions, and presently found myself in a low long room, with a sanded floor, at the end of which was a counter behind which stood a frowsy man in a soiled apron.

"Hallo, William," cried Farthing; "here we are again, and as hungry as hunters. Steak and onions for two, William, and two pots of porter."

"Not if I know it," said the frowsy man. "Do yer think this is Buckingham Palace, a-coming in and ordering me round like this? Well, it ain't. The last time you was 'ere, you eat enough for two, and didn't pay nothing. This ain't Buckingham Palace, and it ain't a Free Institootion for the Destitoot. There's a soup-kitchen round the corner; you'd better go there."

"Well, I'm going to pay now, William. Last time I was called away suddenly on business."

"You was called away when my back was turned. That's what you was. Most remarkable pressin' business it were."

"But I tell you, I'm going to pay this time, William. That is, this young gentleman is."

"Let me see the dibs. Not a bite nor a drink do you 'ave till I see the dibs."

Thereupon, under pressure from Mr. Farthing, I produced my solitary gold coin, which had an immediate effect upon the frowsy man.

"All right, Mr. Vavasoor. Onions and steak it is," he remarked more genially.

"Mr. Vavasoor—that isn't——"

"Hush," said Farthing. "It's the name I use here. Wouldn't do to let him know my real name—Flopper might hear of it, and he's very strict about his masters never entering public-houses. Flopper's great on the moral tone of his academy."

The steak and onions came in due course, and were excellent. It was a fortunate circumstance for Mr. Farthing that I had little appetite, for it enabled him to eat the greater part of my share as well as his own. I never saw a man eat so fast or so ravenously as Mr. Farthing. His conduct created in me the gloomiest forebodings concerning the commissariat at Flopper's.

"Sure you don't want it, youngster? Well, I do. Never leave anything you've paid for—that's my principle."

He certainly lived up to his principle. He chased the last crumb of bread round his plate with a kind of frenzy, which occasioned rude observations on the part of the frowsy man.

"Go it," he observed. "I'd eat the plate, if I was you. Call it a h'extra, cheap at tuppence. You could digest it, never fear."

Mr. Farthing only laughed, and called for more bread.

"Not if I know it," said the frowsy man. "You've

'ad a loaf already. Blest if I know where you put it. It must be a disease you've got."

"It is," said Farthing cheerfully. "It's the fog working on an empty stomach. Always affects me like this."

"Well, all I can say is I 'ope it'll be a fine day when you come next time. I've always 'eard fogs was bad for business, and now I know why."

The frowsy man withdrew, grumbling, and Mr. Farthing, who had drunk my porter as well as eaten the greater part of my dinner, began to grow confidential.

"How did Flopper get you?" he asked. He did not wait for my reply, but began to explain how Flopper had got him.

"Educational agency, my boy. Don't you trust 'em—that's my advice. Like a servants' registry, you know. You sit round, and wait to be looked over. One don't like the colour of your hair, and another objects to your moustache. Some of 'em prefer Scotch, because the Scotch don't mind sleeping two in a bed; and some Irish, because they're cheaper."

"And which are you?" I asked.

"Just now I'm Scotch, but educated in England, which explains why I can't use the dialect. But I'm all things to all men, when I'm hunting a job. By the way, one of the characteristics of the Scotch is that they love whiskey, isn't it? Don't you think I ought to keep up my reputation?"

This duty appealed so powerfully to Mr. Farthing that he immediately ordered two Scotch whiskies, hot, and proceeded, as before, to take my share as well as his own. Under these mellowing influences Mr. Farthing became increasingly loquacious, until I began to discern with alarm that he was in the first stage of drunkenness. He confided to me the pathetic fact

that he was an orphan, Scotch on his mother's side, and the rightful heir to large estates in Argyle; that he was in love with Flopper's daughter, who treated his advances with unmerited disdain; that in his opinion life was a beastly swindle and not worth living; immediately after which gloomy speech he laid his head on the table and fell fast asleep.

Here was a pretty predicament. The afternoon was waning, and I ought long ago to have been at Flopper's. I remembered also that my trunk, containing all my small possessions, had been left at the station, and perhaps by this time was irretrievably lost. Under these circumstances I sought counsel from the frowsy man.

"Your friend's all right," he answered grimly. "He've eat like a boa constrictor, and natural he goes to sleep after it. Give 'im 'arf a hour, an' he'll wake up as right as a trivet. An' very likely 'oller for more whiskey, which I ain't a-going to give 'im, this being a respekable 'ouse. It's my belief he ain't used to food and drink, and he's just sufferin' from the surprise of being filled up unexpected at your expense. I suppose you wouldn't like to stand me a drink while we're a-waiting for your friend to wake up, eh?"

Of course I had to stand a drink to the frowsy man, who solemnly expressed the hope that my shadow might never grow less. I suppose the fact that free drinks were going round without his active participation must have penetrated the consciousness of Mr. Farthing, even in his sleep, for he woke up suddenly and declared that he was thirsty.

"Now, Mr. Vavasoor," said the frowsy man, "just be reasonable. You've been fed and drunk free gratis by this young gentleman. An' by what I can make out you've left his trunk somewhere, which by this time might be stole or made off with. To my thinkin'

you owe it to this young gentleman to go after that trunk of his'n, and not stop here drinking any longer. 'Specially as I ain't going to let you have no more drink."

"Bless my soul, I forgot all about the trunk. Come along, youngster, we'll go and find it."

With that we sallied out into the fog and entered upon a surprising series of adventures. Either Mr. Farthing's sense of direction was feeble, or it was seriously weakened by whiskey, for he professed himself hopelessly lost in the course of the first ten minutes. In order to discover his locality he found it necessary to enter every public-house we came to; and when this excuse ceased to have probability, he explained that he had to see a man about a dog. At one stage of his erratic career he entered the vestibule of a music-hall, and was very angry because there was no performance going on. He dragged me to the top of a bus, on which lumbering vehicle we seemed to ride an interminable distance, and should no doubt have ridden further had we not been put off by an irate conductor because Mr. Farthing refused to pay a second fare. Where we went to I don't know, of what we did I know little more; my clearest memory is of various quarrels with all sorts of people, which elicited from Mr. Farthing an eloquence of vituperation quite unmatched in my brief experience. My eyes smarted with the fog, my head ached, my throat was filled with soot; but Mr. Farthing retained his high spirits, and maintained his character as a Scotchman (on his mother's side) by various renderings of Annie Laurie, sung in a high bibulous voice, with emendations of his own, in which the name of Edith Flopper constantly occurred. It was by the merest accident we discovered the railway station, which loomed up suddenly before us, like a vast anchored

ship with lighted portholes; and by the merest good luck we found my trunk.

"And now," said Farthing solemnly, "for the business of instructing the young. We've had a high old time, and 'the trivial task, the common round' recommences. John Farthing, I bid thee put away ambition. A long farewell to all thy greatness."

"Your friend don't seem very well," said a sympathetic porter. "Hadn't we better put 'im in a keb?"

"Porter, tell me one thing," said Farthing with portentous gravity. "Am I sober, or am I not?"

"Well," said the porter judicially, "you're as near as—no matter. It's somethink that might 'appen to anybody. I'd recommend coffee."

"You're a wise and good man, porter. You're lost in your present employment. You ought to have been upon the Bench. I will take your advice and have some coffee. The verdict of the court is coffee."

We drank our coffee, and climbed into the cab, from the window of which Mr. Farthing insisted on reciting Hamlet's soliloquy. This effort delighted the sympathetic porter, who declared that Hamlet "certainly knew a thing or two about life," and that Phelps wasn't in it as an actor with my friend. With this eulogium the cab rolled off into the fog, and we began our solemn and devious journey to Flopper's.

I was so tired that I fell asleep, rousing only at intervals when the cab collided with the pavement-kerb, or lurched against the lamp-posts. At the end of about three-quarters of an hour I woke to find the fog quite gone. We were climbing a long paved hill, and over us was a clear sky full of stars. The dark dome of a church rose behind a line of trees, and on each side of the road were old stately buildings.

Mr. Farthing, now quite sober, said, "Now youngster, remember the train was six hours late, owing to

the fog. We'll be at Flopper's in about five minutes."

The cab turned down a side street, at the top of the hill, and stopped before a low long house, defended by high iron gates.

The cabman rang the bell, and a youth in faded livery unlocked the gates. The house-door swung open, and I saw upon the steps a small man with a long ragged beard, who looked like a goat. The resemblance lay not only in the ragged beard, but in the narrowness of the face, and the peculiar glassy stare of the bluish eyes.

"That's Flopper," whispered Mr. Farthing. "He looks suspicious. Let me deal with him."

"The train was very late, sir," began Mr. Farthing, as we ascended the steps.

"No doubt, Mr. Farthing. It's a singular thing that the train is always late which you happen to meet."

"Circumstances over which we have no control, sir."

"Precisely—circumstances—yes—circumstances."

He said this with a sort of snarl, and I had a fear that he was actually going to butt Mr. Farthing off the steps, so like a goat did he look at that moment. Perhaps he would have done so had not a broad motherly figure appeared, requesting him to shut the door, and bring the young gentleman in, for he must be tired and hungry.

"Quite so, my dear, quite so. Come in, Mr. Shenstone. The—er—other questions we will leave till to-morrow."

It was thus I made my acquaintance with the Academy for Young Gentlemen, conducted by F. L. Hopper, Ph.D.

CHAPTER VII

EDITH HOPPER

I NEVER knew the history of F. L. Hopper, or, as I prefer to call him from long usage, Flopper. I think he had been some kind of Dissenting minister, and later on an auctioneer, in both of which employments he had failed dismally. When he took to keeping school it was certainly from no special aptitude, for he had neither education nor interest in any form of knowledge. He probably saw some chance of remuneration in it, and regarded it as an easy way of earning a fair income. He found a ready clientele among the sons of small shopkeepers, clerks, and farmers. The parents of these boys had social ambition enough to prefer a private academy to a common school, and Flopper was astute enough to know how to minister to their vanity. He certainly had one talent, which owed something perhaps to his career as an auctioneer, viz., the art of writing delusive circulars. These circulars, in which he laid great stress on the value of moral influence, the perils of moral contamination in ordinary schools, and the superior moral vigilance of his own methods, were sown broadcast, and bore annual fruit in the shape of ever fresh relays of hopeful fathers and dejected boys.

The morning after my adventure with Mr. Farthing, Flopper treated me to a long lecture, full of misplaced emphasis, and characterised by great eccentricity in aitches. He spoke at length on the salubrity of 'Ighgate, and the 'igh aims of his H'Academy;

during which oration Farthing winked at me in the most audacious manner. I was at the same time introduced to my class, which consisted of four grubby small boys, whose fathers had been persuaded (with difficulty) that Latin was an essential element of a sound education.

It was really an amusing experience which I now entered on. "The Academy" was such a topsy-turvy institution, its methods of education so palpably absurd, and the conduct of Flopper so incalculable that I had no chance of dulness, though my occupation was dull enough. That my four pupils learned anything from me, I am unwilling to believe: but that did not appear to distress Flopper, since no one learned anything at all in any other department of the school. I soon found that I had no faculty for teaching, nor had any one else, except Mr. Lamson, the Headmaster, who really carried all the burden of the school on his patient shoulders. Lamson was a stoutish middle-aged man, with an unusually large head, fair hair going grey, and a certain foppishness of dress on which he laid great store. He had held his position for a dozen years, during which he had seen a long procession of junior masters come and go. He was supposed to be in love with Edith Flopper, and to be certain of a partnership in the school. Farthing was an irresponsible Irishman, who brought the spirit of farce into all he did. There was a third master, of unknown nationality, whose appearance was so odd that he was a constant butt for ridicule. We commonly called him "The Creature," and if I ever knew his name, I have long ago forgotten it. He had immense feet, a patient foolish face, and hair which appeared to be turning green. This phenomenon was the result of hair-dyes, for which he had an unnatural love. It was one of his eccentricities to shave his fore-

head, in order to increase its height, and to attain what he fondly believed was a resemblance to Lord Byron. We made a curious quartette; never were seventy boys committed to the care of four persons less calculated to inspire respect. And, harrying us to our task night and day, was Flopper, with his glassy blue eyes and goat's face; always rushing about from room to room for no intelligent purpose, driven by the obsession that he was a great moral educator, who must assert himself and the Ten Commandments on all possible occasions.

"As the twig is bent the tree's inclined" was a kind of sacred text on which Flopper preached interminable sermons.

"Look at me," he would remark; "all I am I owe to early training."

To an unbiassed mind the vision was not encouraging. Looking on Flopper suggested an endless dull vista of grey sordid days, the product of which was a lean little grey man, anxiously scouting for bread by means more or less nefarious.

Yet he was shrewd too, in his way. He had taken the measure pretty accurately of the parents who sought his services, and had found out a way of impressing them which was certainly ingenious and successful. The latter half of each term was devoted to the preparation of Maps—maps of England, Europe, and America—carefully executed and highly coloured, each purporting to be the sole work of the boy whose name was neatly written on them. These maps were taken home by the boys, and served as testimonials of efficiency. No doubt fond mothers gloated over them, drew vainglorious attention to them, framed them, and hung them up in parlours; and it was a safe calculation that no boy would reveal the damning fact that he had little or nothing to do in their creation beyond

applying the colours with a camel's-hair brush. For this was the truth. For six weeks Lamson, Farthing, and the Creature drew these maps, superintended their colouring, and wrote the boys' names upon them. They went home with the boys, and one could overhear the multitudinous voices of ignorant parents proclaiming proudly over tea and muffins how clever John or Thomas was, and what a wise teacher of youth was F. L. Hopper, Ph.D.

Flopper was accustomed to invade my room at uncertain intervals. If I happened to be hearing my four grubby boys recite their Latin declensions, he would stand in a transfixed attitude, nodding his head with a great air of appreciation, and saying, "Good, very good."

"Stick to your Latin, young gentlemen. Remember Latin is the key to a liberal h'eddication," he would remark.

He raised aloft a Latin grammar in making this remark, by way of conveying to the youthful mind the impression that he himself owed everything to Latin.

I think even the boys were aware of the deception. They dared not laugh, of course; but they nudged each other vigorously.

The green-haired Creature was once persuaded to make a brief address in Latin to Flopper, in which many ingenious comments were made on his personal appearance, and the quality of food he provided for the masters.

Flopper was very gracious next day. He told us he greatly appreciated our confidence in him. From this, and similar remarks, we concluded that he took our Latin insults for compliments on his character and abilities; and I believe that it was only a suspicious grin on the foolish face of the Creature which

prevented Flopper from having the address framed and hung up in the schoolroom.

I had been about six months at Elm Tree Academy when Edith Hopper suddenly invaded my life. She had been away on a visit, returning the week before, and I had seen her only at a distance, walking in the walled garden, which neither masters nor boys were allowed to penetrate.

I was writing poetry at my desk, having heard my four boys go through their stumbling declensions, when the door of my room opened softly, and Edith Hopper appeared. I had a swift impression of a slight, undersized girl, with a proud small face, warmly coloured, a low brow under a mass of reddish hair, and a provocative blue eye. "O, Mr. Shensstone"—she began, "I wanted to find a quotation, and thought perhaps you could help me. It's something about 'cloud-topped towers,' and I'm not sure whether it is by Milton or Shakespeare."

"It's in Shakespeare's *Tempest*," I replied.

"I thought so. I've brought the book. Could you find the words for me?"

She thereupon came to my desk and laid the book before me. I was too confused to conceal my own verses on which she turned a curious eye.

"And so you write poetry? How clever you must be! But there—I forgot—you've published a book of poetry, haven't you?"

"I've had a book printed."

"Yes, I know. The Boy-Poet of Barton. Won't you let me see it?"

She sidled close up to the desk as she spoke, and took up my verses.

"O you are really writing poetry now! You must let me see it. I'm sure father would be so pleased if he knew."

"Would he?" I replied stupidly.

"Of course he would. He's always bragging about you. You don't know how much he thinks of you. We *all* think so much of you."

She turned her provocative blue eyes full on mine, and smiled ironically.

"I can't let you see these verses," I replied weakly. "They're not finished."

"But I have seen them. I'm reading them now—

—The sunset like a streak of blood lay low

she read, and laughed maliciously.

"Please, Miss Hopper, don't—remember the boys," I whispered.

For I was aware of four young heads lifted up, and four pairs of eyes watching curiously, and I felt exceedingly uncomfortable.

"Well, I won't, if you'll let me see them privately. You shall read them to me in the garden."

"That's not allowed, is it?"

"If I allow it, that should be enough," she retorted, with a proud stiffening of her slight shoulders.

She came a little nearer to me, and, no doubt accidentally, laid her hand on mine. Was it by accident also she let her hair sweep my cheek as we bent together over my unlucky MSS.?

I was quite sure I did not like her. I did not like her hair, nor her eyes, nor her assured way of ordering me to meet her in the garden. I did not want to meet her, and I did not want her to read my verses. But when her hand rested on mine, and her hair touched my cheek, something woke in me stronger than like or dislike; that irresponsible response to mere sex on which no doubt she counted.

"At six this evening," she whispered, "beside the old yew-hedge. I will be there."

The four boys were watching now with round eyes and mouths agape.

She looked up suddenly.

"Your boys are very inattentive to their lessons, I think. They should be punished," she said sharply.

The four heads dropped over the four books with remarkable celerity.

"Thank you so much for the quotation," she said in a sort of public voice.

"But I haven't found it for you."

"Can't you pretend?" she whispered, scornfully.

"Why are poets so very, very dull?"

With which Parthian arrow she left me. She sailed out of the room with an air of great disdain, leaving me confused, with the sense of having been cajoled into an unwilling compact. Through the half-closed door she looked back at me and grinned. It was not until she had gone I remembered that she had taken my verses with her.

This was flattering to my vanity, but nevertheless I was not pleased with the situation. I had heard a good deal about Edith Hopper from both Lamson and Farthing, and what I had heard did not make me eager to cultivate her acquaintance. Ever since she was a little girl she had conducted flirtations with the masters and the older boys. Lamson had made desperate efforts to become engaged to her, with a shrewd eye to a partnership in the school, but had achieved nothing. When she had no other male attraction she would fall back on Lamson; who, poor fellow, was always an easy victim to her lure; but the advent of a new master always resulted in a transposition of her affections. She was vain and shallow; proud and capricious; but she had in an extraordinary degree that indefinable power of allure which lies in mere sex.

"O," said Farthing, when I told him of my adven-

ture. "So she's caught you, has she? I bet I know how she did it."

"Well, how?"

"Tricks as old as Eve," he laughed. "An innocent way of fixing her eyes on yours till they shoot a sudden flame into your blood; hands that have an accidental way of touching yours; nothing positive, nothing that she can't repudiate with injured modesty if you take her too seriously, but enough to make you want her. She's a miniature Delilah, is our Edith. We all know her—'specially Lamson."

"Isn't she going to marry Lamson some day?"

"My boy, she isn't going to marry any one until she can't help it. Some day perhaps—when Lamson is getting old and she's passé; but not while she can get all the sport of love without its bondage, you bet. We're a sort of male harem here, and she's the grand sultana. Just now you're the new favourite—that's all."

"Don't you think I should meet her, then?"

"Why, certainly. 'Gather the rosebuds while you may'—etc. Get experience; you'll enjoy it. She's invited you to meet her at the old yew-hedge, hasn't she?"

I blushed furiously.

"O don't worry—we've all been there, we all know the old yew-hedge. Lamson once waited for her there till ten o'clock on a wet night, and nearly got pneumonia as a result. Go on and prosper, my boy."

He waved his hands pontifically, and added, "You don't know how important a thing the old yew-hedge is in this establishment. Flopper knows that it is a fine asset. He counts on Edith to keep his masters, in spite of poor pay and wretched food. Didn't I say she was a miniature Delilah?"

If Farthing meant to deter me from meeting Edith

Hopper by this ironic analysis of her character, he not only failed but produced exactly the contrary effect. He raised in me the spirit of adventure. I had not dared to think of life hitherto in its relation to sex. I was too young and innocent for such thoughts; but suddenly the flame woke up in me, a boy's fresh curiosity on the fundamental facts of life, a boy's innate passion to proclaim his nascent manhood. I began to count the hours till evening. I framed speeches that I would make to Edith. My old Byronic reading came back to my mind with a rush. I was a tremulous young Don Juan awaiting his first assignation.

Six o'clock came at last, and I stole like a thief across the playground toward the door in the wall that opened on the garden.

In another mood I might have been moved by the beauty that met my eye. It was an old garden; it had been a garden ever since the days of the Commonwealth, and indeed long before that. Old elm trees of immense girth and height, an old sundial in the centre of a green lawn, and beyond the warm red-brick walls an old warm red-brick house, that had once been the country residence of Nell Gwynne: and over the whole scene the golden haze of evening, and an indescribable effect of peace. It was a place made for love, and lover's vows: doubtless it had heard them many times. Beneath the broad elms full-bosomed beauties of the Restoration had moved in wanton elegance, and prim Puritan maidens had lifted demure lips for lovers' kisses. One could fancy that a hundred intense passions still vibrated on the air, that the very atmosphere was poignant with seduction. And at the end of the garden was the old yew-hedge: a dark living wall at least ten feet high; and against it startlingly defined, a small white figure. It was much too glorious a setting for Edith Hopper's shallow

loves. The vagrant masters of the Elm Tree House Academy were poor successors to the stately ghosts of these ended generations. Yet my heart thrilled at the vision of that slim white figure outlined against the wall of green. It gained dignity from the scene: it seemed a note in the continuous music of life, which ran back so far into the glory of the past.

I stood before her, bashful and silent. I realised for the first time how far older in experience is the merest girl than any man.

"So you've come," she said. "Well, I've read your poetry, and I think it beautiful."

"I didn't mean you to," I stammered.

"No? But isn't it nice to think some one has read it who can appreciate it? And after all I'm only the first to read what every one will read some day."

This was a compliment so delicately fashioned that my reserve gave way at once.

"Do you really think so? Do you mean that there's anything in it?"

"Of course there is, you foolish boy. There's fame in it, though it's only poor little me who says it."

"I'll never forget you're the first to say it."

"That's very nicely put for a beginner," she said with a gleam of malice.

"I mean it," I affirmed boldly.

"Do you? I wonder. You've only just met me, and you'll never forget me. How do you know I shall want you to remember me?"

"A poet never forgets his first great admirer," I replied,—and then, with a sense of my own cleverness, added,—“he may never have another.”

"One is enough, if the one happens to be one he loves, don't you think?"

She raised her eyes to mine with that air of delusive innocence on which Farthing had remarked.

"Come and sit down: let us talk."

There was an arbour cut in the yew-hedge, and a seat. The place seemed made for secrecy.

"And now tell me all about yourself."

"There's not much to tell. I've always lived in Barton. I've written verses. I intend to be a writer some day."

"And is that all? Has no one ever read your fortune better than that?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that I believe in palmistry. Let me read your hand for you."

Was this another ruse? Farthing would no doubt have so described it. But a sudden detestation of Farthing had taken hold upon me. I told myself that he had been unjust to this simple girl. He had interpreted her by his own coarseness. He had missed the fineness in her. I glanced timidly at her face—small and flushed, with innocent eyes that gazed right into mine so guilelessly, and that warm mass of hair—Red? No, it wasn't red. It was like the copper beech upon the lawn, where the sunset bathed it with a ruddy fire. It was hair that it would be delightful to touch, to kiss——

"You haven't given me your hand. I'm waiting."

I held it out to her. She took it in her soft warm palm, and began to follow the lines upon it with her finger. She talked at intervals in a slow whisper—a strange jargon about life-lines and love-lines, and starry tangles.—I was not listening. It was her soft touch that filled my consciousness. I was trying to distinguish whether she really pressed my hand or not. It seemed she did, but the touch was so gentle that one dared not attribute meaning to it. Should I—dared I return that gentle pressure—would she be offended—would she?

"There, I don't believe you're listening at all," she said. "You may take your hand. I've done with it."

"No, no," I exclaimed. "Please go on. Indeed I am listening."

There was no doubt about her pressure now: and suddenly inflamed, I lifted her hand to my lips and kissed it.

"Why did you do that?" she said quite calmly.

"I don't know. Please forgive me."

"But I didn't say I didn't like it."

"Do you?"

She said nothing, but drew a little closer to me. The sunlight had faded from the beech-tree, and the lawn was growing dark. A thrush was singing the last bar of her vesper hymn.

"Do you?"

Her hair swept my cheek. It had a warm human fragrance that produced in me a sense of intoxication.

"You are very young," she said.

"Nearly seventeen," I answered proudly.

"That's why I like you—you're so young."

In the dim light I saw her lips lifted up to mine, and I kissed her.

Having done so, I rose, with a conviction of having done a great wrong. I stood gazing down upon her. But she did not seem at all troubled.

"Here are your poems," she said quietly. "I've kept them in the bosom of my dress."

"Go on keeping them there," I answered in a choking voice, trembling at my daring.

"Well, until to-morrow night. You can have them then, if you'll meet me here."

"May I?"

But she had glided off into the dusk of the dewy garden. I saw her white dress move among the shadows of the great elms.

The bell rang for evening school. It must have been seven o'clock.

I went out of the garden-gate on tiptoe. I was the possessor of a secret: something the world must never know. Edith Hopper had done something to me that had changed me. And predominant over every other thought was a kind of hatred for Lamson and Farthing, a conviction of the insignificance of the one, and the baseness of the other.

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CHAPTER VIII

THE YEW-HEDGE

FOR many months, indeed for more than a year, after that meeting in the old garden, my life centred round Edith Hopper. Looking back I can see clearly enough that I did not love her, and that her power over me was nothing more than the lure of sex. But there it was; try as I would, I could not break away from the enchantment. I did try at times, I had hours of illumination when I saw her in no attractive light, hours too when the face of Lucille swam across my mind like a far-off reproachful star. But at a touch of Edith's hand or lips, at an appealing glance from those falsely innocent blue eyes, I was recalled to my bondage.

It was not for want of knowledge that I became her puppet. Lamson, good fellow as he was, bared his heart to the point of indecency to save me.

"She doesn't mean anything, my boy. She's only playing with you. She's the kind of girl who must have men's hearts to play with. It's an obsession, a mania. She's played with mine ever since she was fourteen. She'd make love to the stable-boy, if there was no one else."

And then he told me his story. He had come to Elm Tree House a dozen or more years before, intending to remain a year or so, while he qualified himself for a mastership in some important college. Edith was a girl at school then, a slim slip of a girl with two braids of reddish hair that fell to her waist, but al-

ready an instinctive flirt. The little witch fascinated him, and soon created in his mind the idea that she would marry him when the time came.

"That's years and years ago," he said. "In the meantime she's had a score of love affairs. She has not even taken the trouble to conceal them from me. After each she has come back to me again, and I have been weak enough to forgive her. I know I'm despicable; but I can't help it. In the end I daresay I shall marry her, and become a partner in the school. That's all that's left to me. But she'll take her fling first, and if she comes to me at all it will only be because I am a last resort."

"I can't believe it," I said hotly.

"Of course you can't; she takes good care you shouldn't. But it's true. Ask Farthing, he can tell you."

"Farthing hates her."

"Does he? Well, he didn't once. He's had his turn like the rest of us, and been discarded."

"If I were you I would be ashamed to say a base thing like that," I retorted.

"I've got beyond that kind of shame," he said drearily. "Besides, if there's shame, it's in the facts themselves, not in my putting of them. I'll tell you what the real baseness is; that I should know what I know, and yet be willing to marry her. Yes, and this baseness too: that a woman should give herself promiscuously to all the sensations of love, but never love. Why, the farm girl who gives herself body and soul to her lover is a nobler creature. She gives all, and gives it to one. Edith only plays at love, gets all she can out of it without danger, and remains absolutely cold of heart."

"If I really thought that——"

"Take it from me, my boy. If you aren't careful, she'll spoil your life as she's spoilt mine."

There was a note of real pathos in Lamson's voice, and there were tears in his eyes. I looked at him curiously: this somewhat dandified head-master, with his fast greying hair, and what he had hoped would be a great career—behind him. Yet my heart hardened against him. I put down his warnings to self-interest and rivalry.

"You're jealous," I said rudely.

"If you think so," he said with quiet dignity, "let it go at that. You will perhaps judge differently some day."

I was disturbed and unhappy at this confession, yet the same night I met Edith at the arbour. She must have had some singular power of divination, for she began at once on the subject of Lamson.

"Why are you so gloomy? One would think some one had been talking against me to you."

"So they have," I said bluntly.

"Lamson, I suppose."

"Well, yes, Lamson."

"I thought so. Poor old Lamson! Did he tell you he wanted to marry me?"

"He said you had promised to marry him."

"I—him! Why he's old enough to be my father. I used to sit on his knee when I was a little girl."

"When you were fourteen."

"O, he told you that, did he? Did he tell you he used to entice me with sweetmeats—a little girl of fourteen, mind you? Did he tell you he's been trying for years to become father's partner, and thinks if he could marry me he might get his ambition? Did he?"

"He did say something like that."

"I thought so. And you listened while he spoke evil of me. O, I know—don't answer, please. You can go away. I don't want to have anything to do with any one who thinks evil of me."

She turned her back on me, covered her face with her hands, and began to sob.

"I've—always—been misjudged. But I did—think—you—were different."

"Edith," I exclaimed, "don't cry. I had to listen to Lamson. But I didn't agree, I didn't indeed."

"I've not had much to make me happy—till you came. Every one spies on me. It's like living in a prison. And when I do get a little bit of happiness you let Lamson try to spoil it."

So she continued, till I was abject enough to confess a dozen faults of which I was not guilty. Having reduced me to this condition she began slowly to relent. Her hand found mine, and she began to interlace her fingers with mine—a favourite trick of hers. Her face turned slowly toward me, the blue eyes full of tears, like those of the girl weeping over a dead bird in the picture by Greuze.

"O, how you've hurt me," she murmured. "Just feel how my heart beats—there, put your hand on it."

"You're not ill, Edith?" I cried in alarm.

"I don't know. I'm so easily upset. Sometimes I think I shan't live very long. It's so hard being a girl, with no one who really loves you. Take me in your arms. Tell me you love me, dear."

Her hair became loosened. It fell in a great shower of red gold over my shoulder. She lay quite still, like a tired child, her warm lips against my neck. The hour grew late, and lights appeared in the upper windows of the house.

"We must go," I said timidly.

"Not yet. Father and mother are out. They won't know. I would like to stay here all night. It's so quiet here, just you and I alone, with London roaring all round us, like the sea round a desert land."

She began to speak in whispers about herself, how

she was misunderstood, how no one gave her credit for deep feelings, how sensitive she was, and so forth.

"Sometimes I think I would like to be a nun. It would be so sweet. I picture the narrow white bed, and the one holy picture on the wall, and the organ playing somewhere a long way off. . . . And the garden of roses where you walk with clasped hands. And then I think I'd like to be a dancer—alone on a great stage, with thousands looking at me. I don't know what I want: only I go on wanting and wanting till I ache. The chief want is for something to happen—anything that would take me out of this dull life. Well, *you've* happened. Why don't you take me away?"

"Where can I take you?"

"You ought to know—that's your business. There are some men who would know."

"Lamson," I sneered.

"Now you've spoiled it all. You're perfectly horrid. Yes, we will go in now. My dream is broken."

How much of these confessions was true? Very little, I fear. But I, poor fool, believed them, being very young and guileless. They were part of her art—the art of the finished coquette. No one knew better how to create an image of herself that lived in the mind, in spite of its untruth, as a real thing. For me she created this image of the misunderstood lonely nature, yearning for some deep experience, because she knew instinctively that it would touch the poetic fibre in me. Yet it may have been true after all, but in a much narrower sense than she would have me suppose, that she did yearn after impossible ideals. Physical passion often finds an outlet in spiritual ecstasy. Dreams are the relief of cramped physical senses. So she dreamed of being a nun, a dancer; and there was no incongruity, since what she really

meant was that she wanted to get outside herself at all costs.

Most of our differences ended as this one did. I would come to her reluctantly: I would come with a sense of weak compliance; I would come perhaps with some bitter saying of Lamson's or Farthing's rankling in my mind. I would invent terrible phrases about her lightness, which I meant to use against her with cruel effect. They were never uttered. At the mere touch of her hand I was changed. Her caresses disarmed me. The maddening sweetness of her contact was a strong wine in which all my colder and my wiser thoughts dissolved.

The worst quarrel I ever had was occasioned by Edith.

One night, in the master's room, after supper, Farthing, who had been drinking, began some drollery at the expense of Edith.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he began, "here let me introduce you to a creature known as the Inimitable Minx. It is a female creature who haunts yew-hedges, and walks at night. It is of unparalleled voracity. It will devour anything of the male order, and lick its chops for more. It prefers its food to be young and tender, but it does not object to elderly fops. It has little discrimination, and is destitute of moral sense."

"Stop it, Farthing," I interjected angrily.

"You can't stop it," he went on blandly. "Nothing stops it, not even a sense of decency. Yet it is a charming little animal, with red hair, and blue eyes, and lips that suck the souls of men.

"She sucks my soul—see, where it flies—etc.—see Kit Marlowe. She prefers the souls of little boys, pious little boys who write poetry——"

I heard no more. In sudden rage I seized a chair and rushed at Farthing. He seized another, and Lam-

son and the Creature joined combat. Why the Creature should have fought I don't know, unless it was from sheer love of battle. His green hair topped the conflict like the Mahdi's banner. His big feet trod us down promiscuously. Farthing fought with quotations on his lips—"Charge, Chester, charge, On, Stanley, on"—and so forth. Lamson's coat hung in shreds. The chairs were reduced to kindling wood. When the fight ended the Creature lay beneath the debris, his big feet struggling frantically to free themselves from the rungs of a chair, in which they were entangled. The battle was Homeric and the noise tremendous. It was the noise I suppose that attracted Edith: at all events the door opened and she stood there, rocking with laughter.

"Behold the prize of the tourney," shouted Farthing.

She was not offended—so far from it she clapped her hands in pleasure. Here was romance indeed—to have men fight for her. I could see well enough that this was her thought. It was for Lamson only she reserved her bitterness.

"At your age," she said cuttingly.

Never did man look more disgraced than the dishevelled Lamson, vainly trying to conceal the fact that his coat lacked a sleeve, and that his collar was missing.

As for the Creature, he simply rumbled to and fro among the chair-rungs, like a rhinoceros with arrows sticking in him.

Edith went away as suddenly as she had come, but we heard her mocking laughter echo down the passage, and at last grasped the ridicule of our position.

If it had not been for the constant depreciation of Edith, I have no doubt the affair would soon have terminated; as it was it only created in me a sense of

chivalry on her behalf. The consciousness of her faults created pity for them. I think that all through my life I have been moved by a strong sense of pity for all women, based on a variety of impressions, among which physical frailty is the strongest. Women are so manifestly handicapped in the battle for existence by mere delicacy of physical organisation; and yet upon the slender strength of women civilisation imposes the heaviest burdens. And to these society adds other disabilities, a traditional attitude of non-intervention in affairs which concern them most nearly, a waiting upon love, a silence upon natural desires, a ban put on their expression, of which there is no counterpart in the life of man. What wonder that woman cultivates her weakness, and uses it as an appeal to the senses, since no more direct appeal is permitted her? What marvel that she becomes indirect, stealthy, crafty in the pursuit of her ends, since cunning is the only weapon left her?

I remember once particularly when I became acutely conscious of that impression with regard to Edith.

It was a hot June evening: I was to meet her as usual in the arbour of the yew-hedge, but for some reason I was an hour late. When I arrived the moon had risen, and the silver light of the moon interpenetrated the last of the twilight gold, and bathed the garden in a kind of magic haze. I trod softly over the lawn and, coming to the arbour, found Edith fast asleep. She was dressed in white; one arm was folded beneath her head, the other hung down, the fingers open, and the book she had been reading lay on the grass beside her. The moonlight fell upon her face and slowly-breathing bosom. The pure contour of the face was that of an antique statue; the lips were slightly open as though seeking the long-deserved but denied sweetness of kisses; the closed eyes seemed the homes of death.

Against the black wall of the yew-hedge that white form looked singularly slight and frail. She looked like a sleeping child. And under the magic of moonlight and sleep the face had become child-like, too. All that was artificial, all that savoured of vanity, pride or coquettishness, had faded out of it; its original outlines were restored as if a quiet finger had rubbed out the record which the restless spirit had written there; there was left only an appealing innocence and weakness.

"Edith," I whispered.

She did not wake. But when I took her cold hand, it closed on mine instinctively.

For the first time I saw her as something reverent, an Eve on whom God's touch was still visible.

"Edith!"

She opened her eyes slowly, and put her arm silently around my neck.

That night we used no words. She seemed utterly content with silence. When we parted I felt that in some new way I had come closer to her than ever before; and, through her, closer to womanhood itself, to that eternal feminine which moves man to his noblest thoughts by its mute appeal for succour and protection.

That hour of silence was the best hour I ever spent with Edith; there was no other like it. Had she known how to retain its glamour or how to use it, I might easily have committed the folly that would have bound me to her for life. I knew I went to sleep that night with a real glow of feeling in my heart, a burning sense of something wonderful that had happened to me, a great tenderness of emotion. But Edith, either ignorantly or wilfully soon destroyed these gracious impulses by her caprice. At our very next meeting she seemed to take delight in exposing the worst parts of her nature. She ridiculed Lamson, describing his

infirmities in terms of sparkling malice; and finally turned on me in the same spirit of satire.

"You think I like poetry, don't you? Well, I don't. I think it's foolish."

"I know you don't understand it," I retorted, "for you don't know the difference between Shakespeare and Milton."

"O well, what does it matter? Shakespeare didn't think much of his own poetry: all he thought of was making a fortune. And as for Milton he dropped poetry for years when there was something better and bigger to be done. I've no patience with people who think the only end of life is to write things about life. I think it foolish."

"So I'm foolish, am I?"

"Of course you are, if you think like that."

"And pray what is wisdom?"

"Doing things. Doing the biggest things you can. Father's doing the biggest thing he can, although I daresay it doesn't amount to much. But you aren't, you're just playing at life."

"You've told me a hundred times you loved my poetry," I answered indignantly.

"Have I? Well, I daresay it was true at the time, but it wasn't true forever. And it was never true deep down."

"It would be hard to know what is true deep down with you, Edith."

"O, I can tell you," she replied with a laugh. "Deep down I'm a very commonsense person, though no one thinks so. I think the world is an excellent place to live in if you can get the things you want, and if you can't, it isn't. I mean to get the things I want. There's only one way for a girl to get what she wants, and that is by marriage. So when I marry I intend to marry a rich man, who has done something big

and practical enough to make it worth while for the world to pay him well. I've seen what poverty means, and I hate it. I always remember the time when father failed in business; I was only six years old, but I can recollect I didn't get enough to eat. A child never forgets that. So I made up my mind a long while ago that when I marry I would have all the money I wanted—I would have a rich man, even if he was old and ugly rather than a poor man though he was clever and good-looking as you are. So there, Mr. Poet—now you know the deep-downwards of me!"

"No, I don't," I cried. "You're only talking. You're not like that really, and only say those hateful things to hurt me."

"Do they hurt you? Poor boy, do they?"

She passed instantaneously from the worldly mood to the emotional.

"I couldn't hurt you willingly. Don't you know that?"

"You've as good as told me you despise me."

"That's because I want to stir you up—to make you do things."

"Well, what can I do?"

"You can go on loving me—if you like. But perhaps you won't like, now you've seen what my down-deepness is."

"Yes, I do like—you know it. I can't help myself."

It was no doubt that confession for which she had waited: and in a moment her arms were round my neck. To her, I do believe, these controversies were a subtle game which she played mainly for the sake of the risks she ran. She was like the angler who delights to give his fish plenty of line, because he knows that the hook holds fast. Of course there is always the chance that the line will snap, and the fish escape; but what a thrill of power it gives to play the

fish in the certainty that you can land him at will. And I suppose that I was as little conscious of the real thoughts in Edith's mind as the fish is of the real intentions of the angler. It is the first art of the angler to deceive the fish, and Edith certainly deceived me. The deception was so adroit, its changes of front so rapid, that to this day I am not sure whether she really loved me, or from the very first made sport of me.

I rather think she did both. The incalculable heart of woman is beyond man's insight. It can keep side by side, like differing strata, an intense tenderness and an intense hardness; and Edith's nature held both.

CHAPTER IX

I FIND A FRIEND

IN the meantime London was opening out before me like a brilliant poisonous flower of intoxicating perfume.

My first impression of London I have already recorded—a blurred confusion of grey houses and roaring life; a Titanic medley of the mean and the magnificent. Gradually I began to trace the lines of order in the chaos, to recognise certain great thoroughfares, to find my way about. On half-holidays I raced down Highgate Hill with the eagerness of an escaped prisoner, rode down the long length of Holloway Road on a bus, and found myself in the Strand. This was in the days when the hand of spurious improvement had not been laid upon the ancient buildings. Holywell Street and Wych Street still stood much the same as when Shakespeare and Marlowe passed under the jutting eaves of the old houses. Holywell Street always appealed to me as a haven of peace amid the shouting seas of London. The transition was so extreme that it appeared magical. In a moment one left behind the streaming crowds, and entered a cloister, somewhat dingy indeed, but still a cloister.

The old street was given up to books and pictures. In the dingy gas-lit shops all sorts of people were to be encountered, bibliomaniacs hunting rare editions, picture-hunters seeking bargains, actors, writers, lawyers, an occasional judge from the Law-courts, or a politician on his way to Westminster; and mixed

among these august persons shabby men who stood reading for hours at the open bookstalls, women in dingy black with books or bronzes they wished to dispose of, ragged "runners" with wolf-faces, who replenished the stores of the dealers with pictures brought from distant auction rooms. Through those dingy shops art and learning passed in a constant parade of rags and tatters. Within them sat the dealers, old men mostly, some women, who apparently sold nothing, but sat all day in hazy idleness, dreamers, inefficients, not one of whom had not "come down in life." They nodded carelessly to you when you entered their shops, allowed you to turn over their stock at will, and apparently had not the least desire to sell anything. One old gentleman who kept a large supply of atheistic literature and pornographic novels, had a beautiful white beard, a most benevolently innocent face, and looked like a bishop. Rumour asserted that he had really been a Dean in a famous Cathedral; certainly his manners were most courtly as becomes a Dean, and there was still a faint accent of clericalism in his rotund voice, and a suggestion of ecclesiasticism in his shiny black clothes. It was from him I bought Paine's *Age of Reason*: and he sold it to me with the unction of a good parish priest presenting a hymn-book to a favourite Sunday-school scholar.

I came to be a lover of Holywell Street, and on many a Wednesday afternoon spent my entire time there. If I roamed further afield to Pall Mall or Oxford Street I always gravitated back to Holywell Street. The place drew me like a magnet. I loved it best on a winter's afternoon just as the lamps were lit, and the lavender-coloured haze dimmed the spire of St. Clement Danes. It was then it seemed to me most like a cloister, with numerous shrines before which dim lights twinkled, so quiet was it after all the

crashing tumult of the Strand. It constituted my first acquaintance with antiquity, my earliest awakening to that nameless charm which breathes from buried lives, forgotten histories, walls brushed by the elbows of dead heroes, stones worn by their tired or eager feet. I thought I could hear the centuries whispering together in the old doorways, and the wings of time vibrating above the crooked roofs. The people poring over bookstalls seemed like ghosts, especially when the winter evenings dropped grey veils of mist upon the street, and intensified the silence.

I too became a bookstall student: many of the books I remember best were read beneath the gas-flares of the street. It was there I made acquaintance with Montaigne and Chaucer, with Addison in scattered volumes of the *Spectator*, and with Dean Swift in twelve stumpy duodecimos bound solidly in calf. I would read on and on till the chime of St. Clement Danes signalled six, and would return the next week in a fever of apprehension lest my cherished books should have been sold in the meantime. They rarely were: it was a constant miracle to me how the bookshops lived, for the same books often appeared in the same place for weeks together. Occasionally some spectacled old bookseller would come to the door and regard me sourly, but no one ever ordered me away. A certain tradition of courtesy prevailed, a kindly lenience toward lean pockets, a scholarly indifference to the principles of commerce. The old gentleman who sold atheistic literature was especially kind to me. He occasionally patted me on the shoulder with a dignified Dean-like condescension, and after a while let me borrow books from him. The only person who was ever rude to me was a cadaverous young man with sandy hair and a bitter mouth who sold ultra-Protestant tracts, which dealt with the secret vices of

Popes and nuns: he took pleasure in denouncing from his doorway people who read books on the stall without the least intention of buying them, which had the natural effect of making me avoid him. He was a most malignant young man, and it occasioned me real joy when he failed in business and departed.

One afternoon as I was poring over Montaigne, a little old man, very shabbily dressed, took his place beside me and began to turn over the books. He looked at me keenly once or twice, and shuffled off. The next week the same thing happened, and I observed him a little more closely. He had a red face, almost concealed in a thick brownish-grey beard, and very keen inquisitive eyes. He wore an out-of-date top hat, a blue camlet cloak, and heavy boots. There was something ruddy and bluff about him; and, small as he was, the kind of dignity any man can attain who is consistently conscious of his own worth. He looked like a man who lived a good deal in the open air; a retired sea-captain I imagined might have shown the same appearance. The third time we met, he nudged me with his elbow, and said in a growling bass voice, "So you're a reader, eh, young man?"

"I try to be," I said.

"Humph! So I see. Montaigne, eh?"

"Have you read him, sir?"

"Forty years ago. Every intelligent man has read him. Shakespeare read him in snatches in a book-shop as you're doing, when he was so poor he was glad to earn tuppence by holding horses in London. Read him in Holywell Street for all I know. Humph!"

"I should like to think that, sir."

"Would you? Why? Eh? Humph!"

"It would make him seem more real, wouldn't it?"

"Ah, I see, you're a dreamer. Humph. So am I. Never did me much good that I know of, but it keeps me from being lonely. Books are the only real company: mind that, young man. They are the food of dreams. Humph."

He pattered off up the street, a singular figure of a man, with his old top-hat and blue camlet cloak; one of those eccentrics who are bred by the unconventional freedom of great cities.

The next week I met him again, until presently we came to look for each other. Sometimes we would stand together at the stall for half an hour without a word being said. At other times he would make sarcastic comments on the books he took up, usually ending with "Humph," which is the only word I can find to connote the growl of his bass voice. His attitude toward me seemed balanced between interest and suspicion. He acted as though he wished to be friendly, but did not quite know how, and was afraid of making a mistake. From the bookseller I learned his name: it was Mr. Heron. The bookseller treated him with deference, and it was clear he was a good customer. When he bought a book it was usually a very old one, and he was very particular about the way it should be wrapped up, and the amount of string that was used.

"No wonder you booksellers don't make fortunes: you waste your string," he would growl.

"Well, Mr. Heron, you know——"

"O yes, I know what you're going to say. Folk won't have any but new string. That's like the extravagance of this vile age. Nothing but waste, waste everywhere. The string wasted every day in England would pay the National Debt in ten years."

"He's a queer 'un," said the bookseller to me one day after he had gone. "I've known him for ten

years, and he's bought a stack of books from me, and always made the same fuss about string."

"Who is he?" I ventured.

"I'm sure I don't know. He never has a book sent anywhere: always carries his own parcels. Shouldn't wonder if he's a rich old miser. But he knows a lot, does Mr. Heron. I wish I knew as much about books as he does."

"He must have a fine library."

"Aye, that he has. And he knows a lot about pictures too. Ask 'em next door—they'll tell you. He doesn't buy more than a picture or two in a year, but it's always the best. They say he has a real Vandyke which he bought of them for a song."

It was through a picture that I finally came to know him well. Next door to the bookshop was a picture-shop kept by a woman and her daughter, and I had formed the habit of looking in there occasionally. They well understood that I had no money, but they had an innocent delight in exhibiting their treasures, and because they thought I appreciated them I was welcomed. They were kindly folk, but totally uneducated. Their memories were packed with a strange jumble of great names, hardly one of which they knew how to pronounce. "'Ere's a beautiful *Heeb*," Polly, the daughter would say, meaning Hebe.

"This is by Dolch," the mother would remark, exhibiting a daub of a dying saint: "Carl Dolch, you know; his own portrait painted by himself."

In their uncouth dialect Angelo became Angle, Boucher was Butcher, Tadema was Tadmā. Their great treasure was a tattered copy of Pilkington, from which they abstracted any resounding name that struck their fancy, and proceeded to label the unlikeliest pictures with it. I knew nothing about art, and had never seen a picture in my life; but I was quite sure

that Michael Angelo never painted a crude sketch of some red flowers in a blue basin, and that the portrait of a disappointed looking gentleman in a top-hat fishing in a canal could not possibly be attributed to Titian. Nor was it at all clear to me how Romney could have painted the portrait of a large lady in white on canvas that was obviously new, or why it was that portraits by Rembrandt were so plentiful, and usually so fresh in paint that I could make marks on them with my nail. These difficulties, however, never troubled Polly and her mother. They had in perfection that kind of faith which believes most devoutly in the things which are most incredible.

One afternoon I found Mr. Heron in the picture-shop carefully examining a small panel picture in an old black frame. He looked at me suspiciously, growled, and edged away into the back of the shop with the picture.

"Didn't know you bought pictures as well as books, young man. Humph."

"I don't," I replied. "I hav'n't any money for either."

"I suppose you imagine you know something about pictures, eh?"

"I know what I like," I said humbly.

"The usual creed of the ignoramus. It's not what we like that counts, but it's learning to like the right things. What do you think of this?"

He held the little picture up to the light. It was very dark and old; it represented a cavalier in the act of laying a present of game before a lady in a white dress, who stood beside a table covered with a flowered velvet cloth, on which was a small mirror.

"I think the cloth is wonderfully painted," I said boldly.

"Humph. Not so bad. You've got some sense, I see. Some artistic sense, I mean."

He turned away, began haggling over the price of the picture, finally bought it, and made the usual fuss about string. During these delicate operations I pretended to be absorbed in the study of a conscientious nude, a large sprawling lady who reposed uncomfortably on a pebbly beach, apparently unconscious of a very lean lion who hovered in the background.

I had learned enough of the etiquette of picture-shops to know that there is nothing a picture-buyer hates more than to be overheard in his arguments about prices, and hence my ostentatious absorption in the perilous relation of the lion to the large naked lady. Perhaps Mr. Heron appreciated my consideration: perhaps he really attached some value to my naïve opinion on his picture: I don't know by what means I won his favour, but as he turned to leave the shop he spoke to me in a kinder tone than I had ever heard him use.

"It's a pity you shouldn't get to know something about pictures," he remarked. "Suppose you walk home with me. I might help you a little."

Of course I was only too delighted. During the walk he uttered not a word, and I was silent for another cause in which fear played a considerable part. I have never seen an old gentleman dodge death with such agility and coolness as Mr. Heron. He plunged into the tumult of the Strand with such an entire indifference to busses, carriages, and heavy-laden lorries, that one might have supposed them mere spectral phenomena, through which a pedestrian could walk with impunity. He shaved big iron-rimmed wheels by a hair's breadth, crawled under horses' bellies, skipped gaily in front of busses, whose drivers hurled epithets at him, slid on greasy asphalt, performed acrobatic feats which drew the wondering gaze of angry

policemen, and, of course, dragged me with him through all these surprising adventures.

"Go it, little 'un," shouted a bus-driver. "Only don't you blame me when you lies in your little coffin."

"No, you don't, not if I knows it," said a burly policeman; but in an instant he had slipped behind the broad back of his would-be deliverer, and was out of sight.

He encountered these perils with an astounding coolness, and seemed actually to enjoy them. I found afterwards that he had a theory that the roads belonged to pedestrians as much as the sidewalks, and in his walks abroad he marched into danger with the spirit of a reformer, for whom safety is the last consideration. I, who had no such theory, was simply frightened out of my wits. The great thronged space of Trafalgar Square appeared to me a veritable sea of death, out of whose abyss it seemed impossible that any one should come alive. However, at last we came into the quietude of Westminster, turned into a narrow street of smoke-stained houses and stopped before an old-fashioned door with a brass knocker, a carved lintel, and two iron extinguishers once used by torchmen, in the days when sedan-chairs were the fashion.

"Well, here we are at Callipash Street," he said cheerfully. "Make a note of the number, young man. It's thirteen. Got it cheap because fools think the number unlucky. Come in."

The hall into which I entered was long and narrow, panelled in some dark wood, and lit by a single gas-jet. Mr. Heron bade me sit down in this hall till he called me, and straightway disappeared behind a green baize door at its extreme end. I had sat for about ten minutes, thinking what a ghostly kind of place it was, when I heard a footstep, and a very old man in a

white apron came up the kitchen staircase, and slowly shuffled toward me.

"Be you the young man from the picture-framer's?" he said. I replied that I was not.

He meditated a long time over this, and at length said, "Well, then, you'll be the young man from the bookbindery, though I ain't never seen you afore." This occupation I also disclaimed.

"Then who be you?"

I replied that I was a friend of Mr. Heron's.

"That you bain't," he answered, with a gleam of malice in his dim eyes, "for Mr. Heron ain't got no friends."

I felt decidedly uncomfortable and a little angry. "At all events I am here at Mr. Heron's invitation," I said.

"That you bain't," he retorted with a chuckle. "I know who you be. You be come to rob the house: and I may as well tell you at once it bain't no mortal use. There bain't nothing you can carry away, and our spoons is pewter. We've got spring-guns and man-traps on every floor, and in point of fact you be sitting over one just now. Take it from me, it bain't no use, and go away quietly, before I calls the perlice."

"No wonder Mr. Heron has no friends, if this is the way you treat them."

"You ain't no call to speak ill of Mr. Heron," he replied. "Man and boy I've lived with Mr. Heron this fifty year, until I be an old ancient man. I've allus done my duty by him, and I be doing it now."

I began to perceive a kind of pathetic dignity in the old man.

"I'm strong yet, though I be thin as a hurdle, and my knees be wobbly," he went on. "I've fought with mighty men in my time, and I bain't afraid of boys."

Wherefore I say, young man, arise and depart, before my anger do fall upon 'ee."

At this climax I am sorry to say I burst out laughing, for not only was he as thin as a hurdle but manifestly as weak as a reed. I was still laughing when the green baize door opened and Mr. Heron appeared. He took no notice of me, but went straight to the old servant and took him by the hand.

"I heard what you said, William. It's all right. There, there, don't be annoyed."

He patted his shoulder as one might in dealing with a disheartened child.

"Now go downstairs, and get rested. As for this young man, I've some business to settle with him. Humph."

William potted down the stairs, and Mr. Heron beckoned me to follow him. The baize door opened on a room the like of which I had never seen. It was very long, completely lined with bookshelves to a height of about five feet, and above these shelves were many pictures, old pieces of glass, china, bronze and wood-carving. A big fireplace glowed at the end of the room, and a glass roof filled the centre of the ceiling. The room was dimly lit with candles. Most of the light came from the fire, on which baulks of old ship-wood were piled. On a brass trivet beside the fire a kettle steamed, and on a corner of one of the tables, surrounded by books and papers, stood a tea-tray. In the fire-flecked shadows of the big room Mr. Heron looked a sort of gnome.

But I had little chance of remarking on the room, for it was clear that its master was disturbed and angry. I had scarcely entered it when he let me know the reason of his anger.

"Young men shouldn't laugh at old men, even when they are foolish," he began. "This vile generation has

no respect for age. You laughed at William. Humph."

"I'm very sorry, Mr. Heron."

"That's neither here nor there. You did it, and it shows your disposition. It's a bad disposition. If you weren't very young I wouldn't forgive you. As you are, I forgive you; though I confess you disappoint me."

I was too chagrined to make any reply. I could only stand stupidly staring at my host, who turned his back on me and made tea.

"There, there," he said at last, "I've had my say. You'll find I always say what I mean, but I don't bear grudges. Now sit down, and tell me something about yourself."

"There's not much to tell," I said humbly. "My father's a schoolmaster, and so am I, but not from choice. I want to be a writer."

"And don't know how, eh? Well, to be conscious of ignorance is the beginning of knowledge. By the way, I don't know your name."

"Robert Shenstone."

"Shenstone? I knew a Shenstone once—years ago—let me see: he wanted to be a clergyman, I think. He disappeared into the Midlands, and I've never heard of him since. I came to London, and became a tea-merchant."

"My father wanted to be a clergyman, and he lives at Barton, which is in the Midlands."

"Well, I wouldn't wonder if it's the same. Now I come to think of it there has always been something in your appearance that seemed familiar: perhaps it was that attracted me."

He was silent a long time, and then said abruptly, "Well, what do you think of my room?"

"I've never seen anything like it, Mr. Heron."

"Well, that's not strange. There are few like it in London. And very few persons have ever seen it. You're the first in four years. The last man who saw it came in by the glass roof. He's now in a place where he can't get out. That little episode upset William's mind. William fought him with a poker, and ever since that Homeric struggle William dreams of burglars."

"Perhaps he thought I came in by the glass roof."

"No doubt he did. He offered to fight you, I think."

"He did. He said, 'Arise, young man, and depart, before my anger do fall upon 'ee.'"

"Yes, I heard him. And he meant it too. William is a most bloodthirsty person."

He laughed as he said this, a long rumbling laugh, and his laughter set me at ease.

"I believe William's listening at the door now, and I wouldn't wonder if he's waiting to search you, before you go out."

"Search me?"

"Why not? He doesn't know you. Besides he wants to search everybody who comes to the house. The picture-framer's man resented it at first, but now he submits like a lamb. He's about the only person who comes here nowadays, and he always humours William. It pleases William, and it doesn't hurt him."

After this Mr. Heron talked a long time upon books and art. I gathered from what he said that he was a friendless man, who had become separated from all his kinsfolk, and was not sorry for it. He lived to buy books, and to accumulate pictures. He had evidently long ago retired from business. He had no modern interests. Newspapers he abhorred and never read.

"They weaken the mind," he remarked. "They keep

the mind jumping from paragraph to paragraph, till all concentration is impossible. They're a kind of mental hurdle-racing: and a horse that's used to hurdle-racing is no good for a long hard race in the open."

It was ten o'clock before he let me go, and I had uneasy visions of what would happen to me when I arrived at Elm Tree Academy. I think he was quite prepared to have talked till midnight, but at ten o'clock William opened the door, handed him a brass candlestick, and said solemnly, "Bed, Mr. Heron."

At the same time William approached me and began to pass his trembling hands over my person.

"He wants to search you. Let him," said Mr. Heron.

So William searched me, more to my amusement than my discomfort.

"Now," said Mr. Heron, "look at this young man closely, William. I assure you he's quite honest. Remember he's a friend of mine."

"He bain't got nothing of yours in his pockets anyhow, that I'll swear," said William. And he added maliciously, "And he bain't got much of anythink in his pockets anyway. A poorer turnout I niver seed."

It was thus I was introduced to the friendship of Mr. John Heron. How large a part he played in my life will be seen hereafter.

CHAPTER X

THE END OF THE BEGINNING

IT was gradually borne in upon me that the Academy was not prospering. Each term brought fewer boys, and black care sat visibly on the shoulders of Flopper. He became more querulous and bitter; he nagged Lamson and Farthing unceasingly: if I escaped his railing tongue it was only because I was of too small importance to attract his anger. I had only two boys to teach now; practically I had nothing to do, and paltry as my income was, I knew that it was more than I was worth. Flopper looked more like a lean goat than ever; he prowled incessantly in the steps of every one, eager to find offence. Even Edith had grown silent and perturbed. One person only remained cheerful, good, motherly Mrs. Hopper, of whom I have said nothing because she was by nature inconspicuous. She was a woman born to live in the background of things; the kind of woman who on the day of judgment will be found mending socks or cooking dinner, with ears closed to the pealing of angelic trumpets. Yet it was from Mrs. Hopper that I first learned the perilous condition of affairs at the Academy. She would occasionally look into my bedroom to hunt for some of my socks or shirts that needed mending, and one afternoon she happened to find me there. I was in a rather happy mood that afternoon; I had written some verses that had pleased me, and was anticipating the praise of Mr. Heron.

"I'm a lazy sort of fellow to be here in the after-

noon," I said gaily, "but my two boys are in Lamson's class for arithmetic, and I've nothing to do."

"I'm not blaming you, my dear," she said softly. She rose to go, but at the door stopped and came back, and I was dismayed to see tears in her eyes.

"My dear, I ought to tell you, but I don't know how. You're more like my son, you know—you're so young—and kind——"

"Why, what is it?"

"Only this, my dear; if you can find another place I think you'd better do so. Things aren't going well with us here. Will you promise to keep a secret if I tell you?"

"Of course I will. What is it?"

"Just this; I can't pay our bills. I've slaved and slaved, but it's no use. I'm sure no woman has ever worked harder, but nothing comes of it—nothing."

She sank down on my bed, and her tears now flowed without restraint.

"Dear Mrs. Hopper," I began. But I found I had nothing to say. I had never seen an elderly person weep before; and I was ashamed to look upon a grief so nakedly displayed. I took her hand in mine, a hand much calloused with the needle, and pressed it softly.

"There, there," she said through her tears. "I'm a foolish woman, and I ought not to have spoken. You're too young to have other people's troubles thrust upon you. But I had to tell some one; and seeing you so happy and unconcerned made me want to warn you."

"Do you mean things are really going badly, dear Mrs. Hopper?"

"They've always gone badly, my dear. Sometimes I think we're doomed, and can't escape. We have seemed to be prosperous so often, and then just when we felt secure something has happened, and it's all

vanished away. I did think that this time we had got on solid ground, but it seems it was not to be. It'll all have to be done over again, the old scheming and failing, and I'm getting old, and I can't face it. No, I can't, Robert. This time I shall never get up again."

"Surely it's not as bad as that?"

"Yes, it's so bad it's bound to be worse. We can't hold on another year at this rate."

And then, like a grieved child, "And I did love that garden so. And those beautiful old trees. O, I can't bear leaving them."

She rose, wiping her eyes, and did what she had never done before—she kissed my forehead.

"You won't mind an old woman's kiss, my dear, will you? I'm so sorry for you."

She was sorry for me! Nothing could give a truer account of Mrs. Hopper than that single sentence. All her life, I suppose, she had been bearing the burden of other people, never questioning that this was her appointed lot. A new burden was now laid upon her, and in her divine self-forgetfulness she could think of what it meant for me. It was as though a mother, dying of some deadly disease, should stifle her own moans to succour a selfish child with a cut finger or a toothache. She was not remarkable in this: she was only obeying a tradition which has been perpetuated by millions of women through scores of centuries. But for me the revelation came fresh: it seemed to me the voice of universal motherhood, and it made me suddenly aware of the sacred beauty of my own mother's character. During these years at Elm Tree House I had gone home for brief holidays, and had not been at pains to conceal my disdain for the simplicities of Barton. I had accepted the service of love but had given little service. I had been the person

who received consideration: I had been slow to render it. Suddenly I resolved that in this crisis I would accept no help from my home. I would put no new burden on those who already carried so many burdens. They must never know my predicament. I saw with great clearness that the time had come when I must fight my battle for myself, and whether I could carry my own load or not I would at least be free from the dishonour of asking my parents to relieve me of it.

It soon appeared that Mrs. Hopper's secret was much less of a secret than she supposed.

One evening Farthing broached the subject. He invited me to go for a walk with him, and under the wind-blown lamps of Highgate he unburdened his mind in his usual dramatic fashion.

"Lad," he exclaimed, "the jigger's up. The drum's bust. The occasion demands serious remedies. What do you say to hot whiskey?"

I had no particular taste for whiskey, but I was curious to know Mr. Farthing's solution of the situation, so I accompanied him into a little ale-house which stood just at the crest of the hill. We sat down on a bench in a dingy room, and waited for two portly cab-drivers to finish their libations. They drank slowly, to the accompaniment of a low grumbling dialogue directed against the sins of the government, and the special iniquities of Mr. Gladstone.

"I 'ear there was a earthquake in Essex t'other day," said one.

"Like enough," said the other with beery gravity. "That there old Gladstone is allers troubling the land."

"They say as 'e's a Jesuit."

"A Jesuit 'e is, and worse."

"What is a Jesuit, Bill?"

"'E's a thing as wriggles, Joe. 'E don't go straight, because 'e can't. 'E wriggles."

Farthing whipped out a notebook and wrote down something in it. He nudged me, and said in a whisper, "Listen to 'em, lad."

They must have heard his whisper, and they certainly saw the notebook.

"There's lots of 'em about," said Bill. "They creeps into publics and listens to what a man says. You'd never think it of 'em. They sits a-drinking like other folk, but they're born wrigglers too. Damn all wrigglers, says I."

"Amen," answered Joe. "There was a old lady last week as ever was, which I druv, and I see 'er taking of my number in a book."

"'What are you doin' of?' says I."

"'I'm a studyin' the 'abits of keb-drivers,' says she."

"'Then you'd better study 'em in some one else's keb,' says I. 'This is a respecttable keb, for respecttable females, an' it ain't used to the other sort.'"

"'I was a-waitin' for that,' says she. 'I knowed you were one of the imperent sort as soon as I see'd you. An' I'm a-goin' to report you to the perlice for undecent language to a lone female.'"

"Now what do you think of that, I'd like to know?"

"I don't 'ave no thoughts, not in a place like this, what is full of spies and wrigglers. I drinks my beer silent, and I goes outside to do my swears. But if you want me for to h'express my feelings in lang-widge which not a saint could object to, let alone a long-haired mug with a notebook, I says, says I, the devil take all ole ladies, likewise all young jumpups with notebooks, and be cussed to their long ears, which don't never 'ear no good of theirselves."

They went off, grumbling, and Farthing broke into a shout of laughter.

"Wouldn't they be fine on the stage?" he said. "Why, the house would rise at them. J. L. Toole's the man to do them. And I'm the man to write the play."

"Are you writing a play?" I asked.

"Not yet, lad. But I'm accumulating materials. And that brings me to what I want to say. Have you, my dear innocent poet, by any chance come to notice that the raven of disaster has perched on the roof of Elm Tree House? Have you heard him croak, *Nevermore*? In short, are you aware that Flopper is about to experience the painful manœuvre known as going up the spout?"

"I know things are going pretty badly," I replied.

"Pretty badly! I should think they were. The worst of Flopper's methods is that they don't inspire confidence. He's always found out: his whole history has consisted in getting found out."

"I know all that. And I'm sorry for him."

"That's your sweet poetic nature, my dear B.P. But the question is not what happens to Flopper. He'll flop. He's flopped before, and got up again. The question is what is going to happen to you and me?"

"Get another place, I suppose. And I'd be glad if you could tell me how."

"O, I could tell you right enough. Go and offer twenty-five per cent of your first year's salary to an agency, and they'll find you a place."

"Is that what you mean to do?"

"Not for Joseph, as the popular song hath it. No, lad. No more teaching of the young idea how to shoot for yours respectfully, John Farthing. I am about to go upon the stage."

"Where?" I cried in wonder.

"That I don't know yet, B.P. What matters the place? The intention is the thing. I am of the opinion of the antique gentleman who said, 'Give me a place for my fulcrum and I will move the world.' I am about to change the name of John Farthing, which is undeniably not impressive, for John Fortescue. That is the place on which to rest my fulcrum. The rest will follow."

"If you'd only be serious for a moment——"

"Serious! I was never more serious in my life, lad. And shall I tell you why I have told you this? Because I want you to help me write a play. My plan's this: I shall go on the stage, and learn all about it. You'll write a play, under my direction. I've got lots of ideas which we can develop together. When the play's done, we'll get it placed, with John Fortescue in the leading part. And then, hey presto!—up goes the curtain on fame and fortune!"

"That's all very well for you—supposing you do get on the stage. But how about me, while I'm writing the play? How am I to live?"

"I shall finance you," he replied grandiloquently. "We will live in an attic—that's the proper thing you know—and work like Trojans. If we can hold out for a year, success is certain."

It did not seem at all certain to me, and yet, I must confess, the prospect dazzled me. I was entirely resolved I would not go home when the crash came at Elm Tree House. To live in a London attic and write—my spirits rose to the adventure. I saw myself made free of the glorious company who had built up the greatness of immortal literature in attics. As for Farthing I knew him for a bombastic dreamer; and yet who should say that in this case he did not dream true? The spirit of romance fluttered golden wings in the squalid bar-room. The walls dissolved, and

august figures, mouthing mighty sentences, moved across a lighted stage and beckoned me. It was hard to believe that John Farthing was of their company: but pride and vanity whispered that perhaps I might become so.

Perhaps the Academy might have weathered the storm—I don't know—but suddenly an epidemic of measles broke out among the boys. Half of them went home, and the rest had to be nursed by Mrs. Hopper. The schoolroom was silent as a cavern. The dormitories were full of unhappy boys who made day and night hideous with their incessant coughing. Edith had to take her part in the nursing, and went about it with a set, sullen face and indignant eyes. She rarely spoke to me now: all her thoughts were turned inward towards her own miserable prospects. One night I met her in the dim-lit passage leading to the dormitories, and her unhappiness was so visible that I should have had a heart of steel if I had not been moved by it.

"Edith," I cried, "won't you speak to me?"

She flashed upon me like an angry tigress.

"Why should I?" she retorted. "Don't you know we are beggars? Do you think I've time to make love with all this hateful trouble dragging me down?"

"It won't make it any easier to hate your friends," I said.

"That's all you know. Hatred makes you strong. I hate my father, I hate you. I hate all these sick monkeys I've got to nurse. It's my hatred keeps me alive. I'm going to get my revenge on life some day. I won't submit to poverty. I won't be dragged down by my father's folly."

"Can't you pity him, Edith? At all events he's not responsible for the measles."

"I've no pity left in me. It's exhausted long ago.

Pity is weakness. I'm not weak; I'm strong. I won't be dragged about any longer at the heels of a father who hasn't got commonsense enough to make a decent living."

Her bitterness so shocked me that I turned away in silence. She came after me, and instantly her arms were round my neck. She pressed her face close to mine, and her eyes burned like witch-lights.

"O can't you understand?" she whispered.

"Understand what, Edith? That you are miserable? Yes, I know that."

"That I am desperate. O take me away! Anywhere you like, anyhow—I don't mind. You can have me, if you want to. I don't make terms."

"Hush, hush—you don't know what you're saying."

"Yes, I do. I've thought it all out long ago. I tell you I don't mind—anything. All I want is freedom."

"It isn't freedom you're asking, Edith. It's ruin, ruin for us both."

"Well, aren't we ruined anyway? Don't you know that when the school closes we shall all be in the streets? If I'm to be ruined, I prefer to choose the kind of ruin that suits me best."

"You have others to think of, Edith—your mother——"

"I have my own life to live, and it doesn't concern any one but myself what I do with it. Wasn't my mother living her own life when she bore me? Did my father consult me whether I wanted to come into the world or not? Not they. They did as they liked. If I could have resisted their will they would have taken no notice. Why should they have rights in me? They've no just claim. I belong to myself. That's justice. And because I know that I belong to myself I mean to dispose of myself as I please. Robert—

can't you see I'm right? I'm giving you something—won't you take it?"

If I had loved her, I think she might have conquered me. But I knew that I did not love her, and I knew that she did not truly love me. I knew that with her passion itself was subservient to a hard selfishness of nature. Behind all the softness of her arms, the warmth of her kisses, there was a tough core of egoism, cold as steel, which no heat could melt. I don't know how I knew this: it was an intuition rather than a judgment: but I did know it, and I knew that if she was willing to sacrifice everything to me it was not for love, but only to escape unendurable conditions.

"No, no, Edith, it cannot be," I murmured.

"Go, then, coward," she cried. She flung herself from me, and stood tense in fury.

"Go, coward, afraid of life! I thought you were a man. I see now you're only a silly boy. The Boy Poet of Barton! A nice title, isn't it? I suppose you thought I was in earnest, didn't you? You thought I could really love a paltry little Latin teacher, who was only employed by my father out of pity? Why, the very bread you've eaten here has been stolen. You've never earned it, and you know it. O, you may think me base because I've said what I have to-night: but I'm not as base as you. Even though I came to walk the streets I should never be as base as you."

What more she said, or might have said, I do not know. I fled to my room, trembling with shame and anger.

Later on in the same evening the precarious condition of affairs came up for discussion as we four masters sat at our supper in the masters' room. It appeared that the Creature had already received notice to go. He was very miserable about it.

"You see I've my mother to keep, and she's a widow," he said simply.

"But, my dear fellow, you can easily get another situation which will be an improvement on Flopper's," said Farthing.

"I'm not so sure," he said. "When I go to the agencies no one seems to want me. They—well, they make fun of me, you know. Sometimes it's my hair, and sometimes my feet."

"I'm sure they're both remarkable," said Farthing gravely.

"Yes, they're too remarkable, I suppose."

"Look here," said Lamson, "stop chaffing, Farthing. We're all of us in a tight place, you know."

"Difficulty is the mother of opportunity," Farthing replied, with a flourish of his hands. "My dear Creature, never despair. Your appearance alone would be worth a fortune on the stage."

"Do you think so? Now I never thought of that." It was said with such innocent gravity that we all laughed.

"Well," said Farthing, "Shenstone and I have our plans. But what are you going to do, Lamson?"

"I was waiting for that," said Lamson. "Now, if you fellows would only be serious for ten minutes I would like to consult you."

"What about?" said Farthing.

"The School, of course," said Lamson. "You see it isn't really such a bad concern after all if any one knew how to manage it properly. There's lots of parents want a school like this for their boys, but they want an honest education, which is natural enough. I've saved a little money, and I've a mind to buy the goodwill from Flopper. It would be a hard job to get things going again on a proper basis, but I think it can be done. The question I

want to put to you fellows is, would you join me?"

"Does the goodwill include the lovely Edith?" said Farthing.

Lamson flushed and looked ashamed.

"No, it does not," he said in a humble voice. "I've done with that—at least I think I have."

"Well," said Farthing, with more genuine feeling than I had ever seen in him, "that really looks hopeful. I'm sure we all wish you success, and we wish it heartily. For my own part, as I have told you, I have other plans. I'm tired of schoolmastering."

"And I too," I said.

"I'd be glad to stay with you if you'd have me," said the Creature.

"I'll be glad to have you," said Lamson. "And if you other fellows think better of it, let me know. It's a question of weeks or perhaps days, how soon the downfall comes."

"Is it as bad as that?" said the Creature.

"There is an execution on the furniture—I know that. It's only the measles that's staving it off."

And then the door opened and Flopper entered. I had seen him under many aspects, none of which I liked; but as I now saw him, there was a kind of patience in his haggard face, which almost touched tragic dignity. His usual bullying arrogance was quite gone; his eyes had lost lustre, and his large hands hung dejectedly at his sides. He looked at us gravely, his eyes travelling from one to another, as if in search of sympathy and comprehension.

"I am sorry, gentlemen, to have to tell you"—he gulped, as though the words stuck in his throat—"to have to tell you——"

We had all risen. Lamson stepped forward, and took his hand, and we honoured him for it.

"Dr. Hopper, please don't explain," he said. "We all know what you want to say, and how hard it is to say it."

"Yes, it's hard, very hard," he replied. "But you see I must tell you—tell you—that circumstances have arisen, circumstances beyond my control, that make our association—in fact, that puts an end to it. Elm Tree Academy closes its career to-morrow. Many things have been against me—— If you gentlemen will come to my office, I will do what I can to pay what is due to you. I think that's all I came to say."

He went out, closing the door behind him.

"Poor old chap," said Farthing. "Well, I, for one, vote we let him off paying us."

And we did. Lamson, I have reason to think, did more: he paid the Creature what was due to him out of his own purse.

In the early dawn of the next day Farthing and I took account of our resources. I had about thirty shillings, and Farthing had three pounds.

"Well," said Farthing gaily, "it's more than the traditional half-crown upon which all great fortunes are built, you know. Lad, think how many men have conquered London on less."

As we left Elm Tree House we noticed two shabby men in the hall. They seemed perfectly at home, for they were smoking and were reading sporting papers.

"By gad, the broker's men already!" said Farthing.

I saw also, what I think Farthing did not observe, the face of Edith at one of the windows. It was a face of stone, the eyes only alive, with what anger and misery God only knew. It vanished instantly when I looked.

The big elms were rustling in the morning wind: doves moaned in the distant stable-yard; the old house glowed red in the sunrise. The iron gates clanged

behind us. A turn of the road took us to the top of Highgate Hill; and there, like a pale sea, out of which rose glittering domes, towers, and tall chimneys plumed with smoke, lay London, already stirring in its sleep, and turning hopefully toward the new-born day.

CHAPTER XI

THE ATTIC

MR. FARTHING had declared his intention of working "like a Trojan," but I am afraid that his ideas concerning the Trojans were vague and his knowledge imperfect. If Mr. Farthing at all resembled them, they must have been a very happy-go-lucky race, who did not in the least deserve their reputation for industry. The great Paris must have had a great deal of trouble with them; for (still deducing my knowledge from the example of Mr. Farthing) they must have spent the greater part of their time in the wine-shops of Troy, where they discussed with much bibulous eloquence the conduct of the gods and the affairs of their neighbours. A Trojan, no doubt, was a very pleasant fellow, with a tongue of honey and a romantic love of adventure, but a worker he certainly was not.

However, this must be said for Mr. Farthing, never was there a more light-hearted companion, with a completer faith in his own luck, and the general goodwill of the world toward him. Halfway down Highgate Hill is a time-worn stone, which commemorates the fact that there Dick Whittington stood, and heard the distant bells of London ring a hopeful prophecy of his success. Before this stone my companion paused and produced a flask of whiskey.

"You're not going to drink already," I protested.

"I am not, my dear B.P.," he replied with great gravity. "I am about to offer a libation to the memory of Whittington. Absit omen."

And he actually did so. He poured a few spoonfuls of whiskey on the stone, and mumbled an invocation. "Much good may it do you," I remarked satirically.

"Thank you," he replied with entire gravity. "Who can tell? B.P., you're a benighted Saxon and don't understand. I'm an Irishman, and all Irishmen believe in magic. It's in our blood. We believe in fays, fairies, bogies, ghosts, luck, fortune; we were all poets when your fathers were cave-dwellers. Beside, who knows whether the old gods are really dead? I've an idea they're only lurking round the corner. If they are, they'll be pleased that we remember them, and if they aren't we're none the worse off.

"And now," he added, with a return to his usual manner, "for our great adventure. The world's my oyster—you know the rest."

We positively ran down the hill; for in that bright sunlight it was impossible to resist the call of hope. London, the desired and the desirable, lay before us: a thousand subtle chances lay ambushed in its golden mist; it rose like a vast Flower of Romance out of the historic earth, and filled our hearts with its perfume.

That first day of entire liberty was a day never to be forgotten; my life has known no other quite like it. What we did, and where we went, I hardly know. I have vague recollections of the Strand with its river of glittering life flowing between tall houses and gay shops; of the dim old entrance to the old Lyceum, where we stood reading a theatre-bill announcing Irving in *The Bells*; of a glass of port drawn from a cobwebbed barrel in Short's; of the Green Park, with its gleam of silent water, and girls passing up and down who regarded us with curiosity and kindness; of the trail of perfume which they left behind, like a

purposed allure to our senses; of the roll of drums on the parade-ground of the Horse-guards, and the lilt of barrel-organ music, and children dancing in the gutter; and, somewhere, toward five o'clock, the passing of the Queen's carriage through a silent multitude. And all the day great white clouds sailed overhead, like urgent Armadas; and the old buildings, that had watched the march of so many centuries, shone white or loomed dark above thronged streets, and the high vanes glittered on the churches, and the great orchestra of the city's life lifted up its music, and voiced the indefatigable energies of man. Toward nightfall, footsore but still eager, we found a bedroom in a coffee-house in Bedford Street. It was a poor place; the bed was dingy, there was a patch on the wall made by the breath of many sleepers; to a fastidious mind the room smelt of obscene promiscuity; but we were unconscious of it. Indeed we did not sleep at all that night. The room in Bedford Street was a mere concession to convention. We walked the streets under the full moon talking of Irving—for had we not looked on his eternal remorse in *The Bells*, and thrilled with his agony; and for the first time realised what genius was, and what it could achieve? No bed for us! The sleigh-bells rang too clearly in our ears—the agonised confession of the great actor was too thrillingly real—his white, drawn face and awful eyes pursued us. We sat a long time in Trafalgar Square, re-enacting scene by scene the great tragedy. Night-prowlers passed us with suspicious glances; dragged women beckoned us: we scarcely saw them. The first fever of great art was on us; that delirium of the heart which makes the eyes blind to outward circumstance. The dawn came up in a burst of rosy flame over Westminster. We washed our faces in the waters of the fountain, and went at last to Bedford Street. The sparrows were

twittering under the eaves of St. Martin's Church, and Landseer's Lions crouched transformed, with manes of fire, symbols of the waking courage of the mighty city.

But the Attic—that was the question. Where were two adventurers, whose united resources amounted to four pounds, ten shillings (considerably diminished now by a single day of London) to find an accommodating landlady who would give us welcome? We hunted indefatigably during that first week for the desired haven, but there must have been something in our looks that did not inspire confidence. I never knew before in what light esteem the literary profession was held, although I have since had abundant opportunity of improving my knowledge. It seemed that to admit that we were writers was at once to place ourselves under suspicion. Had we professed ourselves successful burglars, I am confident we should have had a far better chance of conciliating the recalcitrant females whom we interviewed. One and all they declined to have anything to do with gentlemen who had not "a steady job." Some of them were bare-armed Amazons; some cringing widows without the spirit of a mouse; but they were equally indignant at our humble efforts to invade their privacy.

"I know you lit'ry gents," said one, in accents of the bitterest scorn. "I 'ad one once what cut 'is throat in my bedroom. 'Adn't the decency to go and do it outside—not 'e. Lived on me a matter of three months, 'e did, and then spilled 'isself all over my carpets. 'Never agen,' says I, and I says it now. You may be very nice young gentlemen, as I will say you looks it, but appearances are deceitful, and I won't 'ave you at no price, an' that's flat."

"But, Madam, we have no intention of cutting our throats," said Farthing.

"You can never tell what you may come to," she said grimly. "I ain't taking no risks."

In the hunt for lodgings we proceeded on what may be called a descending scale of respectability, until at last our necessities drove us over London Bridge into that district of populous poverty known as South London. Here, at last, in a narrow street, close to the *Elephant and Castle*, we found our benefactor in the person of Mrs. Trudge.

Mrs. Trudge was a small woman who inspired me with the notion that she was not so much small by nature as truncated with the downward pressure of calamity. She was not so much crushed and flattened as bulged out, like a creature whose burden was too great. She was clothed in a dingy black dress, and wore a shapeless black bonnet, which looked as if it had been slept in, which I believe to be the fact, for I never saw her without it at any hour of the night or day. The bonnet was also crushed in, as if she had formed the habit of standing on her head, and on her wrinkled forehead was a pair of spectacles, which she must have considered a form of adornment, for they were never used for the purposes of vision. For the rest, she was apple-cheeked, with a warm country ruddiness, and her brown eyes had the appealing look of a good dog who has never found a kind master, and wonders why.

To our request for lodgings she confessed that she 'ad a room, a very tiny room, and vouchsafed the information that while she sometimes let it to a respectable gentleman, she did not make a 'abit of it. On the way upstairs she dilated on her personal history, from which it appeared that but for the wickedness of lawyers, she might now 'ave been riding in her kerridge.

"My 'usband, 'e were a real gentleman, 'e were,

with 'ouses of 'is own, which 'e lost through a wicked friend, what was a lawyer, 'e being, so to say no one's enemy but 'is own, which 'e drank at times to drown 'is sorrow, though this I will say that 'e were the gentlest man in liquor as ever was, an' niver once behaved unkind to me, which is what can't be said for ev'ry 'usband, not even the best, though the best ain't of much account, bein' all by nature selfish, and treating pore wimmen as dust beneath their feet, and made for to be put upon——"

A want of breath, occasioned by the steepness of the stairs, interrupted her flow of speech, but it was instantly renewed when we reached the room.

"There it is," she exclaimed, with the pride of one who unlocks the door of a state-room of a palace, "there it is, young gentleman, an' as airy a room as you could find anywhere, though not to deceive you the smuts do come in at the winder somethin' awful if you leave it open, which I niver does, though 'eaven knows I was brought up in fresh air, an' loves it as much as most, but them smuts do make the linning dirty an' no mistake, which is a thing I 'ates——"

"It's a capital room," interrupted Farthing; "not a doubt about it, Mrs. ——?"

"Trudge is my name, which before marriage it were Perkins, Martha Perkins, an' my mother allers said there weren't no luck in Martha, for by what she could find all the Marthas she iver knowed worked hard, like the woman in the Bible, and didn't get thanked for it neither, which were as true a word as was iver spoke, me 'aving worked 'ard all my life, and niver been, so to say, a foot above a beggar, though if I 'ad my rights I should be rolling in a kerridge——"

"Yes, yes," said Farthing diplomatically, "I'm sure you would. And I'm sure no one would have become a carriage more than you."

"You're a nice pleasant-spoken young gentleman, you are, which it isn't ivery young gintleman as cares to speak kind to a lone widder woman, most of them 'aving no eyes for anything but silly girls, as is natural. But soft words butter no parsnips, as the saying is, an' before you comes under my roof I want to know what you and your friend does for a living, the last I 'ad being in the gasworks, a decent lad as iver was, but was exploded, an' died in a 'orspital, owing me a month's rent, which 'e couldn't 'elp, poor lad, 'e being took orf sudden like the grass as to-day is, and to-morrer is made 'ay of, so to speak——"

"We are writers, Mrs. Trudge."

"Writers? Well, I niver 'eard of any good coming of writing, for that lawyer-fellow, I'm sure 'e wrote beautiful, and he wrote me out of 'ouse and 'ome, 'e did. Not but what there's a living in writing too, so I'm told, which there is a man sits by the *Helephant* which writes cards with people's names on 'em, though what folks wants with cards I'm sure I don't know, an' I've 'eard tell 'e's rich as Cresote——"

"Mrs. Trudge," said Farthing firmly, "we don't write cards. We write plays and books. My friend is a poet——"

"Sakes alive, but 'e looks young to be that——"

"And all we want is a quiet room, where we can do our work——"

"I niver 'eard as poets worked——"

"And the point is, this room will suit us if you let us have it cheap, and we want to know the price."

At this she pursed her lips, and looked like a child who tries to be crafty.

"I'm sure I don't know what to say about that, young gintlemen. It depends upon your 'abits. Trudge allers used to say as it were 'abits that counted,

'is 'abit being to be gay even when 'e were in drink, which were a comfort, I will say——"

"Now, Mrs. Trudge, never mind our habits. They are strictly respectable. We are poor but honest, and we like you."

"Well," she said, "maybe I like you, tho' it isn't all gold that glitters, and not to put too fine a point on it, what would you say to five shillings a week, with attendance, and maybe a cup of tea now an' then thrown in?"

"Done," we cried. And the irrepressible Farthing seized the old lady round her dumpy waist, and executed a dance which left her breathless and protesting.

"I don't call that being quiet," she panted; "not but what it shows a good disposition, Trudge bein' accustomed to do the same when 'e were in liquor, 'e bein' gay by nature, and that fond of 'is joke that even when 'e were a-dying 'e said that if 'e could but see Punch and Judy again 'e b'lieved 'e might get better."

"Put it down to our joy at finding a room that suits us, and a landlady whom we like," said Farthing. "It isn't every one in London who's so lucky."

The old lady trundled off at last, and went downstairs, remarking that we must be thirsty, pore lads, and she would make us a cup of tea; tea never coming amiss at any hour of the day or night, being the cup that cheers but not h'inebriates, as she had often 'eard Trudge say, though it was little enough 'e drank of it, God knows, which it would 'ave been better for 'im if 'e 'ad.

A fastidious taste might have found much to criticise in the room. It was long and narrow, with a slanting roof, and was certainly "airy," for the rafters at some points appeared to object to a close contiguity with the walls. The one window commanded an exten-

sive view of smoking chimneys, with a grey dome in the distance which I afterwards found was Bedlam. But we were in no mood for criticism. The first time a youth occupies a room that is his own is a thrilling hour in his experience. It may be a poor thing, but it is his own, and he is master of all he surveys. We had what Farthing called "a high old time" in arranging our small belongings to the best advantage. It is astonishing what fine effects can be produced by a piece of highly flowered cretonne judiciously arranged to conceal a truckle-bed, a bookcase of rough deal nailed against a bare wall, and a broken arm-chair, the absence of whose fourth leg is not really noticeable if you do not sit down too suddenly. Of course it was somewhat inconvenient that the stove-pipe did not fit, and that little eddies of smoke gushed from all its joints, but then you could always open the window, and create a fine wholesome draught in the room. As Mrs. Trudge remarked, though never so 'umble there's no plaice like 'ome, not that it's really 'umble after all, you young gentlemen being so to speak real h'artists, the way you arrange things:—and when the lamp was lit, and its warm glow filled the room, we were as content and comfortable as any two impecunious youths in London could ever hope to be.

If we could have earned a pound a week between us or even ten shillings, we should have been completely happy; but for the first two months we earned nothing at all, and but for the trustful nature of Mrs. Trudge would have been in dire straits. She little knew how much that promise of a cup of tea "thrown in" meant to us: Elijah wasn't half so glad to see the ravens as we were to see the little squat woman with her black earthenware teapot and her cheerful garrulity. My chief trouble was that Farthing wouldn't work. He had a theory that to produce a play local

colour was indispensable, and local colour I soon found meant a wide acquaintance with public-houses.

"I'm accumulating types," he would say. "My dear B. P., we must know life. You complain that I go to public-houses. Don't you know that the most racy conversation in England is heard in bar-rooms? How do you suppose Shakespeare could have created Falstaff if he hadn't gone the round of the taverns?"

"That's all very well," I would reply, "but you're spending money, which we can't afford."

"It's an investment, lad, and a sound investment too. Besides, if you know your way about, you can stay a long time in a pub without spending much money. You get treated, and you can chalk up scores."

"But our money's nearly gone, and what will you do when we come to our last shilling?"

"I shall arise and go forth. In this million-peopled city there are a thousand roads to fortune. Don't fear, I shall find one of them."

And he did, although it was a road that neither of us would have chosen had choice been possible. Somehow or other he became acquainted with a certain Mrs. Rhoades, who at that time was the lessee of the old Surrey Theatre. Mrs. Rhoades was a large, genial person, with a flabby face, and a brown wig. She spent her days in a little windowless room behind the stage, where she directed the energies of as queer a body of actors as could be found anywhere in London. They included acrobats and contortionists, shabby girls whose hands had not lost the marks of factory labour, middle-aged men with red noses and pallid complexions, loud youths who were addicted to check trousers and flashy jewellery, the very dregs and sweepings of the theatrical profession. They were good enough for her purpose, however, which was to

provide a crude entertainment for people who demanded the best seats in the house at a maximum expenditure of sixpence.

I was introduced to her one night by Farthing, after witnessing a performance so bad that even a Surrey audience wouldn't stand it. The leading lady had fled the stage in tears, pursued by insults, and the leading gentleman had been so unfortunate as to receive a rotten orange full in his indignant face. If I remember rightly, they had been engaged in a comic version of *Romeo and Juliet*, in the course of which Romeo's black wig fell off, disclosing a cropped red head, and the ladder by which Juliet meant to elope broke beneath her weight. This circumstance evoked loud cock-crowings in the audience, together with some plain-spoken remarks on Juliet's legs, which were of an Amazonian thickness, and clothed in dirty white stockings. To her previous remark, "The orchard walls are high and hard to climb," the audience had responded sympathetically, "Don't try it"; and when the ladder broke they yelled gleefully, "I told you so." The stage carpenter added to the bedlam mirth by being suddenly discovered, through a collapse of the entire front of Juliet's house, in his shirt-sleeves, drinking a pot of porter, which occasioned a loud smacking of lips on the part of some hundreds of thirsty youths who filled the galleries. It was not until a troupe of acrobats appeared that order was restored; but even their performance could not wholly divert the attention of the audience from the sound of loud scuffings behind the stage, from which it appeared that the leading gentleman was engaged in fighting the stage-carpenter, and was getting the worst of it.

Mrs. Rhoades was in tears when we entered her sanctum, and the leading lady was sobbing violently in a corner, saying that she had never been so in-

sulted in her life, and that she believed her legs had received fatal injuries.

"Not that I mind about my legs so much," she remarked, "but it's my feelings that is injured. I'm hurt in my feelings, and I can't get over it."

"And what about mine?" Mrs. Rhoades was saying. "For ten years I done my best, and it ain't no manner of good. I'm sure it's enough to break any woman's heart to have a mess like this."

"That you have, Mrs. Rhoades," said Farthing, entering with a gay smile. "You're a public benefactor, and we all know it. But if you will allow me to say it, you've made a mistake in playing down to your audience. Now, if you would only try the legitimate drama——"

"An' what's the use of the legitimate dramar in the old Surrey, I'd like to know?"

"Well, let us say melodrama. It's much the same thing. A real old-fashioned play, Mrs. Rhoades—depend upon it that's what you want."

"Do you think so?" she said doubtfully.

"I'm sure of it, Mrs. Rhoades."

"And where am I to find it? All the old ones are worked out."

"I could write it, or at least I could with the co-operation of my friend Shenstone. Let me present you to Mr. Shenstone. He's a great poet, whose poems have attracted very wide attention, Mrs. Rhoades."

I was duly presented, and was conscious of Mrs. Rhoades' critical stare.

"Well, Mr. Fortescue (at this name Farthing nudged me), for all I know you may be right. Things can't go on like this, and they can't very well be worse. I'll tell you what I'll do. You go home and write me a play, and I'll consider it. I won't bind myself to anything, but if it suits me I'll take it. Only remem-

ber poetry's no good at the Surrey; what we want is situation, quick action, something that keeps the interest on the jump. I'm a fair woman, and if you can give me what suits me I'll deal fairly by you."

"I'm sure you will," said Farthing effusively. "You're an honour to the profession, Mrs. Rhoades. And if you could make a slight advance to me and my friend while we write the play——"

"I don't know about that. How do I know you won't run off?"

"We couldn't if we wanted to. We're too hard up. You see I tell you the truth because I trust you."

"You've got a glib tongue," she said with a smile.

"And you've got a good heart, Mrs. Rhoades."

"There, there," she said, "I'm too old a campaigner to be taken by flattery. But you seem two decent boys, and you've got what I never had much of, eddication. I'll give you a pound a week for just one month, and that's time enough to write any play. There's a sovereign for the first week. Now run away and do your best."

"Lad," shouted Farthing, as we came out into the dark street at the back of the theatre, "our fortune's made. Mrs. Rhoades is a brick. Didn't I handle her beautifully? And upon my word, I'll not disappoint her. Not one drink shall John Farthing drink till the play's done. That's a bargain, and you'll see I'll keep it."

CHAPTER XII

THE PLAY

THERE are few circumstances in my life of which I am less proud than my association with the old Surrey Theatre: yet at the time I was proud enough. Mrs. Rhoades was the providential deity who saved me from starvation, which was a matter of some consequence to me, although of little enough to any one else. She gave me a month of golden visions, and, if they melted into undesirable reality, at least they were delightful while they lasted. Most of us can say no more of the best episodes in our lives, and we should be grateful if we can say as much.

The morning after our interview with Mrs. Rhoades we rose early, with the pleasant sense of great things impending. Our frugal breakfast was soon despatched, and we sat down to work. It soon appeared that Farthing's views of the drama and my own were vitally diverse. I inclined to Shakespeare, and he to J. L. Toole. My thoughts moved among kings and his among clowns. My mind naturally turned to my discarded drama of Madame Pompadour. He insisted that there were more dramatic possibilities in Mrs. Trudge. But the truth was we neither of us had a theme, nor the least idea how to write a play. We could conceive well enough a single character, but when it came to inventing action, and making action the exposition of character, we were alike at sea. The morning passed without a single line being written.

The blank foolscap started us in the face, and mocked us.

"We don't seem to get any forrarder," said Farthing dismally.

"We don't," I replied with conviction.

"There's more in this playwriting business than meets the eye."

"There is in most businesses."

"I'll tell you what we must do," said Farthing; "we must study our audience. It doesn't matter a rap what *we* like: we must find out what they like. It's like fishing: you don't ask what kind of bait *you* prefer, but what kind the fish like best. B. P., let us go forth and study the question of bait."

We pursued our study during a long afternoon among the dismal streets of Lambeth. If there is any more depressing quarter of any great city, I do not know it. The crowds who passed us were uniformly ill-dressed. The trousers of the men had frayed edges, and their boots were patched. The women looked slatternly, their skirts dragged, their hats were awry. They looked like people who had long ago given up all idea of keeping up appearances, who no longer felt the promptings of a cheerful vanity. Upon all the adult faces was a look of dejection, such as soldiers have who know themselves predestined to defeat. Even the younger faces had the beginnings of the same look, like the first shadow of eclipse. One could fancy Lambeth a deep pit, into which men slid by inches, and at last lay stupidly quiescent in the mire at the bottom. As I looked I found a new meaning in the old Biblical phrase of "the horrible pit and the miry clay."

One thing of a different nature, we did at last notice, the newsvendors were very busy. They were doing a roaring trade at the street-corners, and were

always surrounded by groups of people who read eagerly, and discussed vociferously what they read. We soon found the cause. A brutal murder had been committed in the neighbourhood, and the squalid details aroused loud comment. It seemed a woman had been killed without provocation, and under circumstances of almost insane cruelty.

"I know'd 'er," a red-faced man, with the voice of a street preacher, was shouting to a group of awed and interested listeners.

"I've seen 'er many a time a-fetchin' of 'er beer. I've spoke with 'er in publics, I do believe. A bad lot she were, but quiet and well-behaved as you could wish. Went about as quiet as a lamb, she did. 'Im as up and killed a quiet woman like 'er must 'ave been a fiend, that's what I says."

A cadaverous man, with a sour puritanical mouth, shook a lean hand at the crowd, and declared his opinion that she'd gone to 'ell.

"Not she," retorted the red-faced man. "She got 'er 'ell down 'ere. It's old rotten psalm-singin' spiteful mully-grippers like you as is goin' to 'ell, for all you thinks you're booked first-class to t'other plaice. You don't suppose God 'ud put up with chaps like you about 'im, do you? Eh, old white-snout?"

This sally provoked loud laughter, during which the white-faced man slunk away.

"We ain't none of us safe while that there murderous villin is abroad," cried an excited woman.

"You ain't—not even the ugliest of you," some one retorted.

"Well, it's my opinion," went on the red-faced man dictatorially, "that 'im as did the deed ain't far away. Maybe, 'e's in a pub at this very minnit, a-drinking 'is beer quiet and respeckable. Maybe, 'e's a-listenin' to what I'm a-sayin' of."

This grim conjecture caused a visible shudder in the crowd. The dull expressionless faces became white and tense.

"Come away," whispered Farthing. "I think we've made a discovery."

We turned into one of the quieter streets, coming presently to a shabby crescent of decayed houses which surrounded a mangy grass-plot littered with rubbish.

"Well, what's your discovery?" I said eagerly.

"Just this, lad: I've found the only motive that really stirs this dull Lambeth crowd—it's crime. Did you see their faces? It takes a lot to put life into them, but this murder did it."

"Well, what of it?"

"Our play must deal with crime. No, you needn't shake your head. There are only two real motives in the drama—love and crime. Look at *Macbeth*. Ask how many persons does Shakespeare get killed in *Hamlet*? Shakespeare knew what the people wanted, and he gave it them."

"He wrote *The Tempest*."

"Yes, when he'd made his name and fortune, and could write what he chose. But do you think he'd ever have got a hearing if he'd begun with *The Tempest*? He knew very well he wouldn't. He looked round for a good old-fashioned blood-thirsty plot, because he knew that was the one kind of story men never tired of. And human nature hasn't altered a bit since the days of the old Globe Theatre. We all like to read about murders, though we are ashamed to own it. They're so much crude drama. Crude natures like them; but then we're all crude at heart, even the most civilised of us."

"I suppose you'd like to dramatise this horrid murder?" I sneered.

"I only wish I could. If I could make people thrill

with horror as that crowd thrilled, I'd be the greatest dramatist of the day. I'm serious, lad."

And there was no doubt that he was. For once his light bantering manner was gone, his eyes were deep with purpose, and his face a tragic mask. I could imagine a new John Farthing rising out of the depths of his personality: a wild Celt, roaring for battle, trumpeting insults, mad for blood: buccaneer, pirate, cattle-lifter, insurrectionary, midnight assassin, God knows what, but certainly a creature beyond law, moving in the amplitude of large passions. In the ghost-chamber of consciousness, whose secret stairs go down into so many dead centuries, who knows what passions lurk which once were ours, and may be ours again, should the black magician wave his wand? I found Farthing's excitement contagious. Something in me—some primordial self—vibrated sympathetically. At the window of my soul, so closely draped with the curtains of convention, a wild barbarian face looked out a moment, and was gone. In that sudden flash of self-knowledge I realised how right Farthing was when he said we were all crude at heart: for the primitive bases, on which all my proud superiority reposed, were laid bare, and proved not largely different from those of a Lambeth crowd, moved out of their habitual apathy by the coarse shock of brutal tragedy.

That night we sat again among the crowd in the theatre, intent on our study of the audience.

It was composed of exactly the same kind of people we had seen in the streets. They one and all had the aspect of persons unacquainted with sunlight, dwellers in caves and holes of the earth, where the air was stagnant. Mrs. Trudge's black bonnet was seen in replica upon a hundred frowsy heads. Young girls were everywhere, but in spite of their loud laugh-

ter and befeathered hats, their faces were pinched and dull-eyed. The young men gazed stolidly around them, the older men passed flasks of whiskey to each other. They sat with humped shoulders, in awkward attitudes, with big work-roughened hands clasped before them. Here and there one saw a fine face, a good forehead or features drawn with firm lines, but for the most part the faces were ill-shaped, suggesting Nature's intention unfulfilled, frustrated by circumstance or botched by carelessness.

Upon this dull crowd the lifting of the curtain was the waving of the enchanter's wand. The stolid faces took on interest, the eyes were illumined as if the stage-lights had kindled a torch in each. Never was an audience more plastic to emotion, or less willing to conceal it. When a woman in a ragged shawl took the stage and sung about a bad bold man who had ruined her, with the refrain,

"'E's a-ridin' in 'is kerridge,
'Im as promised to me merridge,
An' I'm left a-starvin' in the snow"

they fairly blubbered. The Romeo and Juliet burlesque had been withdrawn, but I am sure I recognised the red head of Romeo in a burglar who did miracles of safe-cracking in a dark room, where several dummy policemen lay dead; and Juliet's substantial legs were unmistakable in his accomplice, who filled a clothes' basket with bags of gold with the most businesslike celerity.

Romeo's contempt of the police evoked strong sympathy, and when he kicked one of them the whole audience roared, "Sarve 'im right." Made bold by this demonstration, he proceeded to reproach his prostrate adversaries with a feebleness of intellect and a general incapacity to discover the most obvious traces

of crime, remarking further that they were usually eating hot suppers with admiring cooks when murders were committed, and took care never to be within a hundred miles of the place where they were most wanted. This speech was interpreted as a reference to the Lambeth murder, and occasioned thunders of applause. Several gentlemen in the audience rose to their feet and endeavoured to make speeches at the same time, whereupon the band played "I Dreamt I Dwelt in Marble Halls," in which the crowd seemed to recognise a reference to the habits of the police in preferring warm kitchens to the post of duty. By this time the red-headed man had disappeared through a window, and when a real policeman appeared, and said solemnly, "Now I wonder where 'e is!" the young men in the gallery shouted, "Took 'is 'ook," and began to throw rotten oranges with such a catholicity of aim that the bespattered leader of the orchestra shook his fist at them, and the first violin ran for shelter under the footlights. Among such excitements did the evening pass, the audience evidently considering it its duty to contribute as much to the entertainment as the actors; and never leaving in doubt for an instant their approval of virtue and their thorough-going hatred of its opposite.

"And now for the play," said Farthing next morning. "Any ideas, B.P.?"

I confessed my barrenness.

"But you must have read something that would serve. Remember we don't need to be original. We've all the world to steal from, and it's hard if we can't find what we want."

Thus adjured I turned in no hopeful spirit to my narrow bookshelf. I knew every book that was there, and knew that dramatic motifs were not in them.

At this moment Mrs. Trudge entered with her pot

of tea, and having set it down, was evidently in the humour for discursive talk.

"We are very busy," I remarked by way of discouragement.

"So I see, me not being blind, a-wearin' out your pore brains you are, which is what the H'Almighty never meant, not on fine mornin's anyway, with the sun shinin' bright as gold; which I'm sure all this writin' isn't good for you——"

"But it must be done," interrupted Farthing. "We write to live."

"An' if I may be allowed to speak, not to be intrusive, that's what I can't understand."

"What can't you understand?"

"Not to be thought interferin' with what don't concern me, such not bein' my 'abit, what I says is, why do they pore boys write *all* the time? Which I'm sure it can't be good for the 'ealth, bein' a thing as sucks the brain dry, till it's like a empty snail-shell, nater 'avin' never so intended, as well they knows over there in Bedlam, 'undreds of 'em so I'm told, with all their pore 'eads like snail-shells with nothin' inside 'em."

At this appalling picture of the penalties of literary industry we laughed loudly.

"It's very well for you to laugh, you bein' young, an' not 'avin' found things out yet; every young man thinks 'e's as wise as Solus, which it stands to reason 'e can't be——"

"Who was Solus?" asked Farthing in a tone of great seriousness.

"I'm sure I don't know, not that it matters, bein' so to speak a form of words, which I've 'eard my mother say it scores of times,——"

"Now, Mrs. Trudge," I interrupted, "thank you for the tea, but if you don't mind we must really get to work——"

"Which I'm sure I wonder 'ow you can, with that pore woman lyin' dead, an' 'im as killed 'er not found yet. I'm sure I'm all of a shake and tremble, not knowin' who may be the next, an' all this blessed night I've dreamed 'orrible, an' glad enough I am to 'ave two nice young men to defend me, not that you'd be much good if I was took on the street sudden."

She was off on another tack, and there was no stopping her.

"Which I don't believe it was a man at all what did it," she continued with a solemn shake of her head, "for by what I 'ear that pore woman was so to speak tore apart, whatever it was as did it comin' up be'ind unbeknown, so the papers say, which don't allers speak the truth, an' well we know it, not but what they're right sometimes, 'specially with 'osses, so I've 'eard Trudge say, 'im once 'aving won five shillings on the Derby by takin' of their tips."

"Why, what do you mean?" asked Farthing. "Who do you think did it?"

"It wasn't a who at all, it was a h'it."

"A what?"

"A h'it. Which I means what I says. Sich is my belief, me 'avin' dreamed all night. An' dreams bein' so to speak God's finger, which the 'oly Daniel knew, likewise many others both before and since"

"What did you dream, Mrs. Trudge?"

"I dreamt of monkeys," she replied.

"Of what?" we cried, with a shout of laughter.

"Monkeys," she said, in a lugubrious voice. "Not them little fellows, what scratch themselves all day, they not 'aving anything else to do, and 'aving fleas, but them big hairy fellows, me 'aving seen one once in the Zoo, an' 'e tried to get my bonnet, so 'e did, an' I was never so frightened in me life——"

"You mean a baboon?"

"Which I never 'eard the word, an' if it means a kind of baby, little enough like a baby it were, 'aving big 'ands an' long arms, an' its face 'ad whiskers——"

"And you dreamed of that?"

"I did, an' I were all of amuck-sweat, for I see one of they babbons, as you call them, plain as plain, what no doubt 'ave got loose from somewhere, an' I see 'im come up behind that pore woman, and tear 'er all in little bits, 'is whiskers all being curled with rage, and 'is mouth a-frothin'. And, says I, that's what did it. It weren't no man, it were H'IT."

There was no doubt about Mrs. Trudge's sincerity; she was genuinely troubled. Her hands shook as she carried out the tea-tray. When she had gone Farthing gave me a curious glance, and said quietly, "Lad, I think we've found our play."

"What do you mean?"

"Mrs. Trudge's dream," he replied.

"A farago of nonsense," I answered.

"Not such nonsense as it seems, B. P. Haven't you a book somewhere with a similar story in it, in which the murderer was a baboon?"

"You mean Poe's story of *The Murders in the Rue Morgue*?"

"That's it. Well, you see Poe wrote a story about a kind of man-monkey, and why shouldn't we write a play? By George, that's the very title we want too—*The Man-Monkey*! It would make a thriller, and no mistake. Lambeth would rise to it. God bless good Mrs. Trudge, she's given us our play."

"I don't like it," I said hotly.

"No, but Lambeth would. There are thousands of Mrs. Trudges who would go to see it. Remember what I said about fishing; we must find out what the fish like, or we can't catch them. You want to try some pretty coloured fly just because it's pretty: and

if that's the way you go fishing you'll thrash the water all day, and the fish will laugh at you. If the fish prefer a big fat worm, why not give it them? You're out to catch fish, not to admire flies. O, I know that all sounds beastly utilitarian——"

"It does," I interrupted. "It isn't art——"

"No, but its commonsense. B. P., I foresee you are predestined to a life of disappointment, unless you listen to the advice of yours truly, John Farthing. There are lots of geniuses in the world who think it their first duty to please themselves, and never for a moment think it worth while to please anybody else. The result is no one pays the least attention to them. Of course they have the consolation of imagining themselves superior to the public and they take their time out saying savage things about the writers and artists whom the public does like. Do you mean to be one of them?"

"It's one thing to write above the public, and quite another to prostitute yourself for gain."

"I don't admire your choice of language, B. P. But I know what you mean: there was never yet a popular success but some ass got up and brayed about a prostitution of talent. Have you never heard the saying that they that live to please must please to live? Do you think it a crime to please people? I don't. I think it's worth while, even though you sacrifice a little of your dignity."

"It's not dignity, but self-respect."

"Well, we won't quarrel about words. There's another word, which comes nearer to the bull's-eye—it's vanity. Now don't be angry. I'm not a genius, and I sometimes think you are. I'm a wild sort of fellow with more commonsense hidden under my foolishness than you imagine. My commonsense tells me that God has given me an opportunity that may never

come again, and if I don't use it I deserve to lose it. It's your opportunity too. Do you want to lose it?"

"Of course I don't. I can't afford to."

"Then that settles the business. Let us stoop to conquer, lad. When we've conquered we can stand as erect as we please, and make the other folk do the stooping."

In looking back I sometimes think that this was the best lesson in the art of literature which I ever received. It was severe, it was unpleasant, but it was wholesome, and, above all, it was necessary. It impressed forever on my mind the truth that the production of art is a partnership between the artist and his public; that it implies a correspondence of feeling and ideals; that to attain perfect expression there must exist common sympathies, and that the range of sympathy in the writer must not exceed the range of the reader, just as in hearing sound at all, sound must not rise above or sink below the octave of the ear. This truth appears absurd as applied to a Lambeth audience, but it is not really so. Such as they were, those dim toiling crowds were the only audience we had. We were not writing for a West-end audience, but for Lambeth. We had to think and write within the range of their perceptions, and, after all, this was as honourable a task as that of Sophocles when he wrote for the populace of Athens, or of Shakespeare when he wrote for the Globe Theatre. The difference is not one of method, but of material. To do a poor thing as perfectly as it can be done is as good art as to do a great thing with a perfect adaptation of means to ends.

So, at last, our play was started. It was crude and grim enough, but as the days passed I grew absorbed in it. The Man-monkey, in our hands, became a sort of Frankenstein monster with all the attributes of

man except a soul. Mrs. Rhoades was frankly pleased with our work. The only real difficulty we had was with the red-headed man, who at first bluntly refused to play the monkey.

"I shall be hissed," he said, "an' I don't like being hissed."

I believe he was finally persuaded by the importunities of a termagant wife and six hungry children. Murder he did not object to; no living man had so large a list of histrionic crimes upon his record. But he objected to being a baboon, although if he had but known it, his personal appearance was admirably fitted to the part. Mr. Darwin would have rejoiced in him. His long arms bespoke arboreal ancestors. His every movement was ape-like. The wild cry he uttered when he sprang upon his victims had in it all the savage lust of beast-filled forests. Farthing, at first, wished to play the part, but having once seen the red-headed man rehearse, he knew that no more realistic ape had ever moved upon the boards; and he freely admitted the man's base triumph.

I still vividly recall the opening night. The theatre was packed. As scene after scene passed in accumulating horror, the audience grew hysteric. The Man-monkey appeared in every scene, and always left behind him the trail of blood. I don't know how many people he slew, but he did little else. I watched the play (if such it could be called) from a box, half-ashamed, strongly excited, with good Mrs. Rhoades beside me, her face bathed in tears of delight.

"We'll run it a hundred nights," she kept saying. "You'll see. It'll draw all London. There ain't another dramar like it on the stage"—which there certainly was not.

And then, at the height of my excitement, as I stood up in my box to take a last look at the yelling

crowd, just before the curtain fell on the red-headed man's infamy, I saw in the opposite box—my Aunt.

There could be no doubt that it was she. That grim shrewd face, with the black eyebrows which almost met, the poke bonnet and the Paisley shawl, were unmistakable. She looked older, and her face had deeper lines, but otherwise she was quite unchanged.

It was hardly possible that she recognised me. I saw her studying the play-bill through a pair of old-fashioned horn spectacles, and when I rose I knew her eyes were fixed on me. I would gladly have fled: but the bond of old affection held me, ashamed as I was of my position, and fearful as I was of what her comment might be on my lamentable drama.

I hesitated a moment; then took my courage in my hands, and went round to her box.

CHAPTER XIII

AFTER THE PLAY

"AUNT TABITHA," I cried——

"O, so it's really you," she replied.

She held up the play-bill, and read out quizzically "*The Man-Monkey*, by John Fortescue and Robert Shenstone.' So you've turned playwright, have you?"

"If you may call it a play," I said humbly.

"O, it's a play right enough—of sorts. I've seen worse."

"I shouldn't have thought it possible."

"I'm glad you've grace to say so."

"I never expected you to see it," I said lamely.

"O, that's easily explained," she replied. "Shanley once wrote a play for the Old Surrey, and I'd a fancy for seeing the old place again. It was years ago, before you were born—how many years you may judge by the fact that I took the part of the virtuous village maiden, and wore short frocks."

"But I thought you were in America?"

"So I was, child. I've just come back, and it was time I came from what I've seen and heard to-night."

The curtain had fallen, and the theatre was fast becoming empty. The old lady adjusted her shawl, and we went out into the street. I had a curious sense of having become a little boy again: the little boy whose curls she had cut off and called "a sissy." My Aunt reasserted her rights in me; she took me in charge, and I followed meekly like a prisoner under arrest. She strode like a grenadier through the crowd,

and at length stopped before an archway in the Borough.

"This is where I stop," she remarked.

I passed under the arch with her, and found myself in one of the most surprising places in London, the old Tabard Inn, from which, if tradition may be trusted, Chaucer's pilgrims started for Canterbury. On one side of the arch was a doorway, opening into a warm bar-room; beyond the arch a dim square lit by a few feeble gas-jets. All round the square ran a double row of galleries, from which bedrooms opened. Dilapidated stairs, with time-worn oak bannisters, led to these galleries. I followed my Aunt up the first staircase and, looking down, seemed to see in the wide court-yard below, the ghosts of sumpter mules, ancient chariots, ambling palfreys, priests, pilgrims, and ladies; and mixed among them ghost-coaches, with guards blowing silent horns, and a spectral Mr. Weller on the box, and a spectral Mr. Pickwick beaming at me through the windows. I thought I could hear the beating of horses' feet on the rough cobblestones. Among the shadows of the courtyard five centuries whispered together old secrets of love and crime, and the damp air was winnowed with the wings of the Ages.

"You've never been here before, I suppose?" said my Aunt.

"No. I've heard of the place, but have never seen it till now."

"Too busy writing about man-monkeys," said my Aunt.

I was silent, for I knew I deserved the rebuke. I could have thought a chuckle of derision ran round that dim gallery, as if the centuries laughed at me.

"Well," said my Aunt, "it's one of the few places in London I love, though I'm sure I don't know why.

It's uncomfortable, and it's ratty—but Shanley brought me here on my wedding-day. That's forty years ago. He was writing plays for the Old Surrey in those days, and I suppose he wanted to live near the theatre. I remember he couldn't pay his bill, and I had to help him out. That was like Shanley. He never would ask the price of rooms, and he always thought he had more money than he had."

My Aunt uttered this reminiscence with that odd note of pathos which I had remarked once before, when she told us at Barton that she had never had a home and hated lodging-house furniture. I had a sudden vision of the long road she had travelled since those days when she played the part of a village maiden in short frocks, and came to this old decayed inn as a bride. I knew that her mind was busy with the same thought, and my heart warmed to her. I don't think she saw ghost-coaches in the old inn-yard; she saw the spectre of her dead husband, blue-coated with a high neckerchief and nankeen waistcoat, as like as not, marching gaily in with improvident audacity, and ordering the best rooms for his bride, without the least idea of how to pay for them. She looked very lonely as she stood there, in that old gallery, looking down into that old inn-yard, where the centuries were muttering to each other.

"Well, that's past," she said, with a return to her usual manner, "and a good job too. But I'm like a cat, I love houses and places, and can't help coming back to them, even when the fires are out, and the folk all gone."

She produced a clumsy iron key, and unlocked the door of one of the rooms. It was a much larger room than one might have imagined, with solid oak beams across the ceiling, and an old-fashioned four-post bed. At the foot of the bed was a battered trunk, plastered

with those strange names which had thrilled me as a boy—Baltimore—Ohio—Delaware—and many others.

"Now," she said, "I'm not going to talk to you to-night, Robert, I'm too tired. Your play (with a sniff) certainly has the merit of exhausting one's nerves. I'm afraid I'm going to dream of man-monkeys. If I'm alive to-morrow I mean to have a good talk with you. You can come round at ten o'clock. Now I'm going to bed."

She made such rapid preparations for this act that I recognised the need for immediate withdrawal. As I turned to go, acutely conscious that she had taken off her bonnet, and that her wig showed signs of following the bonnet, she called me back.

"I haven't offered you any refreshment," she said. "I forgot you were a man, and probably like whiskey. You can order some in the bar, and put it down to me."

The wig was unmistakably at a most precarious angle, which outraged the laws of nature, and I once more made haste to go. Again she called me back.

"You've forgotten something," she said.

"Didn't I say good night, Aunt?"

"O, yes, you *said* good night. Don't you think you might kiss me?"

I kissed her warily, having my eye upon the wig.

"Well," she said grimly, "if that's all you know of kissing, you don't know much. Perhaps it's a sign of virtue that you don't, but as a kisser you're distinctly disappointing."

I amended my ways, and lost my fear of the wig. She looked so alone in that big void room that my heart went out to her wholly, as it had done so often in the old days at Barton. I put my arms round her neck, and hers were round mine.

"That's better," she said. "Remember, I'm not an

ogre, if I am an old woman. No woman's too old to be kissed."

"Well, good night, Aunt."

"Good night, and don't forget the whiskey. You can drink my health—and, if you like, the success of your play. We both know it was pretty bad, I think: but such as it is, we'll wish it success."

She closed the door behind me, and I was alone in the dim gallery, looking down upon the ghost-coaches.

The next morning I dutifully kept my tryst.

I found my Aunt in a quaint little room behind the bar, with her skirt drawn up to her knees, toasting her feet before a bright fire.

"And now for our talk," she began briskly. "Let me see, I left you a little boy writing absurd poetry, and I find you a young man with a singularly bad play to your credit. I want to know all that you've been doing since I left you, so please begin at the beginning and tell me everything."

I endeavoured to comply with her wishes, and gave her full details about my relations with Mr. Wart, and my experiences with Flopper. She listened in silence to my narrative, and when I had done began to cross-question me.

"Did you say Flopper—as you call him—had a family?"

"He had a daughter Edith."

"And you fell in love with her, of course?"

"I don't think I did."

"If you don't think you did, why, you did. You needn't blush. Only I thought it was Lucille Overberg."

The name of Lucille, thus uttered, affected me strangely. The spirit of romance had entered the room suddenly.

"Well, it was not Edith," I said.

"No, but you thought it was, didn't you?"

"I might have done so."

"Well, we all make mistakes. The pity of it is that most of us stick to them."

"You don't blame me then?"

"Blame you, why should I, child? It's a young man's business to fall in love. I never had a great admiration for Joseph, though as a moral person I'm bound to respect him. It isn't falling in love that hurts a youth; it's not being able to fall out again."

"Well, I've done both," I said, with a laugh.

"So much the better. You should have learned something. You know my view of things; they only never attain wisdom who have never dared to be fools. I'm quite pleased to find you've been a fool, Robert."

"I'm not pleased at all."

"No? Well, I suppose that is natural. That's the worst of being young, young people are so dreadfully serious. They see everything in capital letters. As you get older you begin to find out that nothing matters as much as you thought it did. I thought when I married Shanley that all the world stood on tiptoe to see me do it. I thought I had reached my climax. I soon found out that there were much more important things in life than getting married—there was getting a living, for instance. And I found out another thing, Robert, that life is not one adventure but many. I think the great thing in life is never to lose the spirit of adventure."

Here was the old note struck again, and it brought back vividly to my memory the sitting room at Barton where my Aunt had read to a thrilled and wondering boy those old newspaper stories of the Civil War. I looked upon my Aunt with a new respect and sympathy. In that face, now so deeply lined, with the black brows drawn in a straight line above the keen

eyes, I recognised not so much the slow disintegration of mortality as the aspect of a spirit immortal and indomitable. I vaguely wondered what her life had really been, what adventures she had known. She must have read my thought, for she said abruptly:

"I suppose you think adventures belong only to the young. You're mistaken. I've known a good many wise youths who were much older than I am. The last thing I'd want you to be is a wise youth."

"There's not much fear of that, Aunt."

"Young wisdom is worse than old folly, Robert. It's our follies keep us young."

She gazed into the fire, and was silent for several minutes. Then she said suddenly, as if a new range of thought had become visible to her, "But there's one kind of folly for which there is no pardon. It's the folly of forgetting those who love you."

"What do you mean, Aunt?"

"Just this: how long is it since you were at Barton?"

"I was there at Christmas."

"And that's eight months ago. Have you ever thought how much can happen in eight months? People can grow very old in eight months, especially if they think they are forgotten."

"Do you mean my father and mother?" I cried, alarmed.

"Who else?"

"They're well, aren't they?"

"O, I daresay they're well enough. But you've never told them about your play, I'll be bound. And you haven't written them many letters lately, have you?"

"I didn't want to tell them anything about myself till I could tell them of my success."

"Land's sake, boy, do you suppose they'd thank

you for that? What do they care about your success? It's not your success they want to hear of—it's you—all your doings—just you.

"They'd rather hear from you even if it were only to say you were in rags, than not to hear at all, and imagine you robed in purple."

A great softness came into her voice, and she added, "Robert, if I were you, I think I'd go down and see them. They won't be there always, you know."

And then, before I could reply, with a sudden dismissal of her tender mood she cried, "Land's sake, that reminds me, I've never asked you where you live, and who mends your shirts, if they ever are mended. It's little enough these London hussies know about mending shirts."

"I've a most respectable landlady," I replied; "her name is Mrs. Trudge."

"And your shirt-cuffs are frayed, and there's a button off your coat. I think I shall have something to say to Mrs. Trudge when I meet her."

"If you can get a word in edgeways," I laughed.

"O, she's that sort, is she? Well, I can talk too. I think I'd like to go round and see her."

I thought I had some good reasons for not favouring the proposed interview, but I was not allowed to state them. My Aunt, once possessed with the idea of reprimanding Mrs. Trudge for the condition of my shirts, smelt the battle afar off, and was as little to be restrained as an old war-horse.

"I daresay you don't want me to see her, but that's neither here nor there. Let's have no Shanleying."

She took me in charge at once, in the most high-handed fashion. If I understood her aright she had already formulated a charge against me, viz., that I was living in a state of "hugger-muggery." I was allowed no word in my defence. All youths in

London lodgings lived in "hugger-muggery" she declared. They didn't know any better, and trollops like Mrs. Trudge traded on their ignorance. She knew: she had "wintered and summered them." She preened herself like an ancient St. George about to assault a dragon. She had her cloak and bonnet on in what she called "a jiffy," and before I knew it had marched me out into the street. I was so conscious of being under arrest that I began to fear the crowd might take me for the Lambeth murderer. If guilt is ever conscious, I felt my appearance must be such as to support the worst conclusions. No one who observed me, with my Aunt's hand firmly gripped on my arm, could doubt for a moment that I was in custody. And, indeed, one group of cheerful hooligans at the corner of St. George's Church broke into loud laughter as we passed, and remarked derisively that I ought to be ashamed of myself, assaulting of a female, and "'im so young too."

Mrs. Trudge welcomed us with her usual effusiveness.

My Aunt may be described as sniffing round her, with a view to combat.

"So you're Mrs. Trudge," she said, in a tone which implied that there might be a reasonable doubt of this or any other statement she might make, and that any such statement might be used as evidence against her.

"Which I am, my late 'usband 'aving been Nehemiah Trudge, as is well known to the rate-collector, 'im 'aving allus paid 'is taxes reg'lar, though not as punctual as could be wished——"

"I don't want to know anything about your late husband. Are you or are you not Mrs. Trudge?" said my Aunt severely.

"Which I don't deny I h'am, not 'aving no cause

to deny the same, me 'aving lived wife and widder in this 'ouse twenty year and more, not but what I've often thought of movin', the kitchen bein' ill-convenient, an' that full of cock-roaches you wouldn't believe——"

"Cock-roaches are the result of dirt," interrupted my Aunt.

"Dirty I am not," said Mrs. Trudge with great solemnity, "an' never 'ave sich a thing been said of me, though I don't deny the smuts do come in somethin' orful, if you chance to leave the winder open——"

"There's one on your nose now," my Aunt remarked.

"Which is what might 'appen to anybody," Mrs. Trudge retorted with dignity, "no one being able to see 'er own nose, leastways not all of it, unless it is deformed and bigger than God meant it to be, which mine is not——"

"There, there, Mrs. Trudge," interjected my Aunt, with some relaxation of her manner, "no one's blaming you."

"I didn't think you was, ma'am," Mrs. Trudge replied magnanimously. "You bein' a stranger to me, and not 'aving cause nor right to blame me, though no one's perfect, and me bein' the last to say I was, not being a 'ippocrisy, as some folk is; an' if I might be so bold, might I ask your business?"

"I want to see Robert's room," said my Aunt curtly.

"Meaning Mr. Shenstone, which I presoom you are a relation, no females bein' allowed to call on 'im in 'is room, sich bein' my rule, owin' to the way some females will run after young men, many of them bein' no better than painted Delilacs, and every young man bein' liable to temptation, even the best of 'em though they look so strong as Samsons——"

"I'm his Aunt,"——

"Which I'm sure I'm glad to know it, though I shouldn't 'ave thought it, there bein' no resemblance. And will you kindly come in and foller me, bein' careful of the stairs, which is not all that I could wish, the bannister bein' broke where they brought down Trudge's coffin, an' often and oft I've said, 'It must be mended,' but 'ave not 'ad the 'eart to do it, bein' so to speak, a reminder of Trudge, pore man, 'im bein' dead and gone this thirteen years come Christmas."

I knew by experience that Mrs. Trudge, once embarked on the subject of the late Mr. Trudge's character and sufferings, was good for a solid hour of reminiscing; so I hastened to say that it was quite unnecessary for her to show us up the stairs, and whispered to my Aunt to follow me as fast as she could. This she did, remarking as she went that of all the women she had ever met she had never found one who equalled my landlady in loquacity.

"She told me once she was born tongue-tied," I said.

"Then all I can say is she's made up for it ever since, and, if they cut her tongue-string, they must have cut too much. Why, she talks sixteen to the dozen, and with as little sense as the clapper of a bell that goes on striking because it doesn't know how to stop."

"Didn't I tell you, you wouldn't get a word in edgeways?" I laughed.

"You did. But you wait a bit. I've not done with her yet."

However we had secured a respite and made the most of it. My Aunt proceeded at once to an examination of my room, and demanded that my boxes should be opened for an inspection of my shirts. These she regarded with stern disapproval. Of

course I had to tell her about Farthing, toward whom she at once formed a violent prejudice. It was fortunate that Farthing was not there to hear her views of Irishmen in general, and of himself in particular. So far as I could judge, her views were coloured by the nefarious behaviour of Irishmen in New York politics, from which she had suffered what she considered the unjust taxation of her property. To my modest plea that Farthing knew nothing of politics, she replied with conviction that if he didn't now, he soon would, all Irishmen being by nature demagogues and agitators, and most of them Fenians.

"Besides," she continued, "I don't approve of young men living together in lodgings. It's bad for their morals, if they've got any, and is sure to lead to mischief."

"Well, what do you want me to do, Aunt?"

"I don't know, child. That's what I'm thinking about. One thing at a time."

Mrs. Trudge entered at this point with her teapot, and offered my Aunt a cup of tea with such deference that she was much mollified. She even allowed Mrs. Trudge to complete her description of the last illness of Mr. Trudge without interruption.

"Never did I think I should be left alone to earn my living by letting lodgings," she concluded, "but sich is life, no one knowin' what a day may bring forth, an' they as wears bridal wails bein' like enough to come to widder's weeds, an' some of 'em bein' glad enough too, merridge not 'aving been all they 'oped, not as I wasn't 'appy with Trudge, though 'e 'ad 'is faults, pore man, which no one knows better than I do."

"Is this the only room you let?" asked my Aunt.

"Certainly not, ma'am, this bein' but a h'attic as you see, though I must say those two pore boys 'ave

been 'appy as Larry in it, an' never once complained——”

“I should like to see your other rooms,” said my Aunt quietly.

“An' welcome,” she responded, “there bein' one to let at this minnit, which maybe your nevvie would like better than this, its bein' natural now you've come 'is prospecks should h'improve.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Trudge, I'll look at it. No, you can stay here, Robert, and put those shirts away, and mind you fold them properly.”

She marched downstairs with Mrs. Trudge, and left me in a state of considerable uneasiness. It was clear that she did not like Farthing, and that she did not think much of the Attic. The natural inference appeared to be that she meant me to change my room; and at this prospect I became conscious of an attachment to the Attic which I had not suspected. It had become endeared to me by occupation and companionship. The sun shone brightly that morning; its warm rays fell upon the home-made bookshelves and the table with its crowded papers; never had the room looked so homely and inviting. And, poor as the room might look to other eyes than mine, for me it represented liberty. My Aunt might mean well, but I inwardly resolved that if she meant me to leave my Attic I would resist her mistaken kindness.

I heard her coming back, and with a notion that to take the offensive is the best strategy in argument, began as soon as she entered the room with a declaration of my fondness for the Attic.

“I've been very happy here, and don't want to leave it,” I concluded.

“Why, land's sake, what's all this pother about?” asked my Aunt. “Who asked you to leave it?”

“I thought you were engaging another room for

me, and I'm sure I thank you for your kindness, but this really suits me best."

"O, so that's what you thought, is it? Well, you're mistaken. You're a very nice boy, Robert, but you're no prophet."

She eyed me with a grim smile, enjoying my embarrassment.

"Robert," she said, with that curious sudden softening of her voice which I had so often noticed, "has it ever struck you that I am a very lonely old woman? Can't you imagine what a lonely woman would want most in a great lonely city like London? If such a lonely woman had some one she really loved in London, can you think what she would wish to do?"

"Be near him, I suppose, Aunt."

"Not near him, but *with* him, child, unless of course he objected. I've made my mind up, Robert. Mrs. Trudge has a very nice room, which will suit me excellently. I'm going to live with you—unless you object."

"Of course I don't object," I answered, but I was conscious of a hesitation in my voice of which I was ashamed. She noticed it too, and looked at me with an air of sadness and submission, infinitely pathetic in one so self-sufficient.

"No, no, Aunt, I didn't mean to put it that way," I cried. "I am delighted, I am indeed."

She put her hands on my shoulders and kissed me, saying whimsically, "Well now, you and I must take Mrs. Trudge in hand—especially about your shirts."

CHAPTER XIV

MY MOTHER

I AM in Barton again, and sometimes it seems to me that I have never been away. I wake in the familiar room, and hear the milk-cart rattle up the street, and the sound of fire-lighting in the kitchen, and my father's movements as he dresses, and the pleasant stir and bustle of the new day. Yet I am aware of something different, of a shadow that seems to glide through the house, a new quietness that is in the air. My father pushes his fingers through his hair more frequently, and the look of perplexity upon his face has deepened. I notice that he sits a long time at his desk doing nothing, staring vacantly at his blotting-pad, and sometimes watching the door as if he expected an unwelcome visitor. I ask him if he is well, and he replies absently that he is well, very well indeed. Sometimes he seems about to tell me something, something secret and important, but he never does. I breakfast with him alone, for my mother does not leave her bed till noonday. When she comes down she is always cheerful, and says she has had a slight cold lately, but nothing to talk about, and it is quite ridiculous that they should make such a fuss about her. She seems to me to have grown smaller, but when I tell her so she laughs and says all old people do that, and it is nothing to worry over. Her curls are quite white now, and her cheeks have lost a little of their girlish bloom, but not much. I notice that she also sits silent for a long time every now and then, and

her hands, which I have never seen idle, are folded in her lap. I find her one day with a little mahogany box in her lap, out of which she is taking letters, tying them up in neat parcels with coloured silk, and replacing them with great care. When I ask what she is doing, she replies that she has a fancy to read over again the letters my father wrote her before they were married, and she blushes as she says it.

"I would like to see you married before I die, my dear," she says.

"Why do you speak of dying?" I ask with a tremor of alarm.

"O," she says cheerfully, "it's what every mother thinks about her son. She knows she must leave him some day, and would like to leave him in the hands of some good woman who would love him tenderly."

"There's plenty of time for that," I reply.

"O yes, plenty of time, my dear. I've always been a very strong woman, and I daresay I shall live a long time, but I can't help looking forward sometimes—we all ought to do that, you know."

I am not so sure that she is as strong as she thinks she is. I notice that when she goes upstairs at night she walks slowly, and that my father gives her his arm, which is quite unusual. But I try not to think much of it, and go on long walks, pondering over themes for plays and poems; but always when I come in I have a new sense of something changed in her, something changed in the very atmosphere of the house, as if the shadow had crept a little nearer.

One night, when my father is out at a meeting of the school trustees, she tells me a little about her early life. She describes an old red brick house by a sluggish tidal river where she spent her childhood, and how she woke sometimes and heard barrels being rolled along the pebbly beach, and the feet of ponies

trotting off into the dark, and the sound of muffled voices.

"They were smugglers, my dear, for I am afraid we were all smugglers in those days, and thought no wrong in it."

And then she shows me a yellow parchment with a coat-of-arms painted on it, and tells me that it was her mother's.

"My mother's family was a very old one," she says, "and the fleur-de-lys you see on the coat-of-arms was won at Agincourt, so I used to hear. But my Aunt, who brought me up, would never speak of those things; she called them pomps and vanities, so I never really knew. But I'd like you to keep the coat-of-arms, because you may think more of it than I was taught to do."

"Was your aunt kind to you?" I ask.

"O yes, my dear; but she was a very strict woman, and was very anxious to prepare me for a useful life. The only valentine she ever gave me had this verse upon it, 'Be not wise in your own conceits.' I think she gave me that because I had pestered her with questions about the coat-of-arms. Another thing I remember was that her favourite saying was that work is the music of life. She would never let me be idle for a moment, and I'm sure I never was. She was a famous woman for baking and brewing and fine needlework, and at night I can remember sitting by a single candle in a big bare room working samplers."

From the little mahogany box she produces a carefully folded sampler, with trees that look like currant bushes, and a green house with a red path leading to it, and underneath the name *Susan*, and a pious verse from the hymns of Dr. Watts.

"I should like you to have that too—it's not worth much, but I think you will value it for my sake."

I sit quite still, as I did when I was a little boy, and looked into the fire and dreamed. I am trying to connect my mother with that prim little girl, working samplers by a single candle in a big bare room, watched over by an ogre of an aunt who believed that work is the music of life. I think what a pity it was that no one told that ogreish aunt that there are many other kinds of music in life—the laughter of children at play and the flutes of Pan in the green woods, for example—that a child ought to know more about them than the dull harsh music of work. I perceive that my mother never had a real childhood, although she always kept the heart of a little child; and I look on those frail hands, folded on her lap, and see the marks of the needle on them, and think of all the toil they have accomplished since they worked samplers in the old bare room by the river. And then I am so touched with pity and affection that I kneel down beside her, and kiss her hands, to her great surprise.

“Why, Robert,” she says, with tears in her eyes, “you mustn’t think I didn’t love work. A woman who has a father and a son to work for should be the happiest of women. I’ve had a very happy life, my dear, so happy that any woman might envy me. I often wake in the night and think how good God has been to me.”

And just then my father enters, looking more perplexed than ever, and stands beside us, pushing his fingers through his hair at a great rate, and she shuts the little box in haste, and says apologetically, “I’ve only been showing Robert some of my little treasures.” And my father looks at her with a long wistful gaze, and seems to gulp back something that he meant to say, and leaves the room silently, and when he comes back again is quieter than ever.

I think I will go back to London, but somehow I

do not go. My father says nothing to dissuade me, but his eyes meet mine in mute appeal. He leaves the school early in the afternoon now, and sometimes accompanies me on my walks. We are a silent pair, and I find something unnatural in the silence. I think we are each conscious of a desire to speak, but it is as though an atmosphere enfolded us which makes sound soundless. We grope towards each other, but find no contact. We go silently along the old coach-road, and turn into a wood-path, leading to the bare hill from which we watch the sinking sun. A church bell rings slowly: a tinkling of cowbells comes from the river-side, as the herd goes home; a flight of rooks passes overhead, and, far away, there is the thumping of a heavy-wheeled farm-cart on a rough road. Children pass us with baskets of blackberries and stained mouths; they look at us shyly, and do not resume their cheerful chatter till they have disappeared round the corner of the hill. The sun has sunk in crimson clouds and a scarf of white mist has risen along the river. I hear my father whispering to himself the familiar line, "And leaves the world to darkness and to me." I think I see the darkness like a black smoke at his feet, slowly rising till it reaches his shoulders, and his face looks out above it, pale and tense, as the face of Lazarus must have looked when he rose out of the grave-gloom.

The day comes when my mother is not found in her seat beside the fire. She says cheerfully that she thinks her cold will go away the sooner if she spends a day in bed.

"I shall get up to-morrow, and come down to breakfast," she says. "I hope you two won't be very lonely just for one night without me."

She makes so merry about the absurdity of any one as strong as she is really needing a day in bed, that

I find myself laughing at her innocent excuses. But the next day she seems to have forgotten her idea of coming down to breakfast. The days pass, and she still keeps her room. Almost unconsciously my father and I accept the new order of things. Her room is so bright and pleasant that we rarely remember that it is a sick-room. A fire burns upon the hearth; the October sun has still the warmth of summer; there is always a vase of flowers upon the mantel, and through the open window come the twitter of birds and the wind-song in the trees.

"I like to hear the wind in the trees," she says. "Sometimes it seems like the sound of the river flowing past the old red house. It is so like it that I often wait for the sound of the barrels being rolled up the beach, and the ponies trotting down the dark road. Isn't it curious how one never forgets the things that happen in childhood?"

I agree that it is curious, but inwardly I feel that it is not a good sign that her thoughts are so much engaged with things that happened long ago. It suggests a detachment from the present, as if that had become unreal. Why should her picture of a dark road and a flowing river be so distasteful to me? I know the answer to my question, but I never acknowledge that I know it. I try to divert her mind with stories of my life in London, and she is interested, asking many shrewd questions about Flopper's and Mrs. Trudge, and laughing at my replies. But I notice her interest soon dies away, and the moment I cease to talk she turns her face toward the window, and is listening again to the autumn wind among the trees. I close the window, on the pretext of a draught, but she says, "No, don't do that, my dear. I like to hear the wind. Did I tell you that the old house where I spent my childhood had big elm-trees round it, and

often I lay awake at night listening to the soft murmur of the leaves? It was so soothing. There's nothing soothes you so much, I think. I always fell asleep to the sound of wind and flowing water. I used to think myself floating out to sea, counting the stars as I went, till my eyes grew tired and closed. It was always a surprise next morning to find the trees still there, and the river still flowing."

The wind appears to exercise its old magic on her, for she falls asleep. I sit beside the fire writing, every now and then looking up, and watching her. She looks very small and girlish as she lies in this wide bed. She looks almost like a child asleep, and she breathes regularly like a child. Her face keeps its soft rose-colour, but it looks smaller, as if what had been a flower were closing up and would soon be a bud again. Sleep, in robbing the face of its vivacity, has sharpened its contours, and brought into prominence many lines, especially around the mouth. She sleeps with her lips slightly parted, smiling. My father comes in on tiptoe, but she knows he is there, and wakes at once.

"How are you, dear?" he asks.

"Why, much better. I've had the most lovely sleep. Isn't it dreadful, sleeping my time away like this, when I've so much to do. When I think of it, I'm quite ashamed of myself."

"If you're only better, dear——"

"Of course I'm better," she answers with an eager nod. "I'm so much better that I think I will get up after dinner, and come down into the study again. We'll have a bright fire, and you shall read to me, and it will be quite like old times. I'm afraid I shan't find the room very tidy though. You always were a little careless with your books and papers, weren't you?"

My father acknowledges his fault, but assures her he has greatly improved of late.

She takes his hand and kisses it.

"Such a hard-working hand," she says fondly. "Always writing, writing. I'm quite ashamed of my hands—just see how soft they are. That comes of idleness. But I'm going to turn over a new leaf, and be really industrious when I come downstairs again."

But after dinner she does not come down. She has forgotten her intention. She sinks back among her pillows, and falls asleep at once. She sleeps with her hand beneath her cheek, and the other with its worn wedding-ring stretched beside her. My father stoops to kiss the ring, and she smiles softly. Although she is fast asleep she is conscious of his kiss.

As a rule she is so composed and cheerful that it is difficult to think her ill, but there comes a night when this composure gives way entirely.

My father is out at one of his eternal trustee meetings, and I am alone with her. She gives a sudden cry, and I see upon her face a look I have never seen before. It is the kind of look a child has who comes home down some dark lane, trying hard not to be alarmed, but gazing back all the time, fearful of something that follows silently. There is a kind of horror in her eyes; they are strangely dilated, as if they saw something not visible to me.

"Mother, mother, what is it?" I cry.

She is sitting up in the bed, trembling violently, with her eyes fixed upon a corner of the room which is in shadow. I put my arms about her, and try to soothe her as one would a child. She puts her dear head on my shoulder, and begins to weep softly.

"O, I was so frightened—so frightened——"

"At what, mother dear?"

"I dare not tell you."

There is a long silence, and then she says in a low voice, which is little more than a whisper, "But perhaps I ought."

"No, no, don't tell me. I don't want to know."

"It was nothing so very dreadful after all," she says, "and I can't think how I was so foolish as to be frightened. It was just my old childish dream of floating out to sea and counting the stars; but I thought the stars dropped one by one into the water, so that it was very dark. They splashed as they fell,—and then something tried to come into the boat—something horrible—I saw its hands, big strong hands—white hands. I thought they wanted to clutch me, to drag me out into the dark water. It all seemed so real——"

She shudders violently.

"But it's all right now," she says, with a pitiful smile. "We can't help our dreams, can we? They don't mean anything, do they?"

She quiets down in a few minutes, and makes light of her fears. She lies with her head on my shoulder, and says how happy she is to have a strong son like me.

"You look just as your father did when he was your age," she says; and I have the feeling that she is recapturing the romance of her youth through me; that through the son she is reaching the father, and that her kisses are bridal kisses.

"Your father has somehow missed his way in life," she says. "I don't think you know how great a man he really is. He might have done so much, but he took the wrong road somewhere. I sometimes think he lost the road when he married me."

"No, no, mother, that was where he found it."

She looks up at me with a glance of infinite gratitude, but goes on in the same quiet voice, "I'm sure

I've tried to be a good wife to him. I've helped him in every way I know. But there are so many ways in which I couldn't help him. My dear, I'm telling you this, because I want you to find the right road, and sometimes I fear you may miss it too."

"What is the right road, mother?"

"Doing things for others, dear. Not trying to be great or clever, but just being good. Being humble, too, I think. Humble enough to ask nothing for one's self. That's where clever people so often make a great mistake. They want the world to recognise their cleverness, and if the world doesn't do it they are dreadfully disappointed. That's what I fear in you, dear. You're much cleverer than your father, but if the only thing you seek is to make the world admit it, you'll find life very hard, as he has done. O, dear me, what a long sermon I am preaching you, and you never did like sermons."

"Go on preaching, mother."

"No, my dear, I've said enough. I think you understand. I want you to read something to me now."

"What, mother?"

She takes up the worn Bible that lies beside her bed, and I notice in it a little bookmark that I worked for her as a birthday present when I was five years old. She has used it all these years, and I wonder what I have done with the birthday presents she gave me. It marks that most touching of passages of St. Luke's Gospel, which narrates how Jesus came in the freshness of His manhood to the help of sick and sinful people, how He healed women of their fevers, and lepers of their leprosy, and was so loved and trusted that when the sun was setting, "all they that had any sick with divers diseases brought them unto Him, and He laid His hands on every one of them, and healed them all." The sacred tender story,

read in that quiet room, has a significance for me it has never had before. I see for the first time how easy it would have been for this brilliant divine youth to have gone out to win a throne, but he was content to help humble folk in their human troubles, and thought it a finer thing to minister to others than for others to minister to him. I read on and on; but always the same story of a life giving itself for others, and often to ungrateful and unworthy folk.

"Now turn to the end of the story," she whispers.

So I turn to those immortal passages that narrate the great betrayal, and the prayer in the Garden, and the Crucifixion.

"And it was now the sixth hour, and there was darkness over all the earth until the ninth hour. And the sun was darkened and the veil of the temple was rent in twain. And when Jesus had cried with a loud voice, He said, Father, into Thy hands I commend my spirit. And, having said this, He gave up the ghost."

My voice trembles as I read. It has never seemed real to me before, this divine story of a life that seemed thrown away, and yet by its very dereliction won eternal triumph.

My mother presses my hand gently as I close the book.

"That is what I mean, dear," she whispers. "I think you understand."

She closes her eyes, and falls asleep, still holding my hand. I look at that tired face, with its sweetness of ineffable content, and I think I do understand. I understand Jesus through her. I see that the life that gives is so much more than the life that gets.

She is still holding my hand when my father tiptoes in, but I know by the smile upon her face that she is conscious of his nearness. His lips silently form the

question, "Is she worse?" I shake my head, and his weary eyes brighten. May I be forgiven my falsehood, but how can I tell this new dreadful truth which has at last reached me, that the hour is not far distant when I shall be motherless?

I do not sleep that night. My heart is torn with reproach. I remember with what complacency I have accepted all her faithful love and service, with what lightness I have regarded the precious gift. My own selfishness is laid bare to me. It does not mend matters that it has been unconscious, and without intention. I see in a flash of tragic illumination that all sons are selfish, that children are trained to receive rather than to give love, that the very sacrifices of parents produce selfishness in children. Life brings its revenges. The day comes when sons have to suffer from their children what they made their parents suffer. But the revenge of time brings no reparation of the past. However long I live I can never rid myself of the knowledge that I have been thoughtless and self-centred. I remembered those scant infrequent letters which I wrote from London. I see my mother watching the postman go by with a sinking heart, wondering why I did not write. I hear her making tender excuses for my negligence, and her very charity is a sword of flame that pierces my heart. I groan aloud in the anguish of my spirit. Through the grey dawn I hear the tolling of the bell of the Irreparable.

My father comes into the room as the dawn is breaking.

"She is worse," he says in a trembling voice. "I think your Aunt should come."

I ask a question I have never dared to ask before, because I feared the answer.

"What is the matter with her, father?"

"Cancer," he replies.

"And you have known it all the time?"

"I have known it for the last two months."

"Can nothing be done to save her?"

"Nothing. It is incurable. We must be thankful that she does not suffer much."

His reticence is quite broken down. He sits upon my bed, with the tears streaming down his face. He speaks sacred words about his love for her which must not be reported. He ends by saying, "She does not know. We must never let her know."

I go into her room later in the day, and it seems my father must be mistaken. She smiles brightly as I enter, and speaks cheerfully. Her work-box lies beside her, and she is sewing buttons on one of my old shirts.

"I'm afraid you have a very careless landlady, my dear," she says. "But then you can't expect hirelings to take the same interest in you that your mother does, can you?"

It is heartbreaking.

"O, mother, please don't trouble about my wardrobe now."

The tears rush into my eyes with a burning smart.

"What, crying? My dear boy must not cry. There is nothing to cry about. I am really much better, I am indeed. I shall soon be quite well."

Her voice is so confident that for a moment my fears dissolve. I can see little difference in her, except that her rose-colour has grown more faded, and her face shines like old silver. Perhaps my father is mistaken after all.

My Aunt has arrived. She is very silent and subdued, and has shown no sign of taking me into custody. She insists on nursing my mother, and it is wonderful how those strong hands of hers have sud-

denly acquired tenderness and skill. No one can pack the pillows so deftly as she does. My mother, after a brief protest, surrenders herself wholly to her care, and is greatly comforted by her quiet strength. My Aunt insists on sitting up all night with her patient and seems incapable of fatigue.

"I'm used to it," she says. "I've had to sit up all night in trains hundreds of times, and it doesn't hurt me. Besides, Susan wants me."

It is the fourth week, and Sunday morning. The mornings are darker now, for the autumn is passing into winter. A wind roars through the elm-trees, and I hear the swift scurry of the dead leaves, like some one running fast in a silk robe that drags along the ground. Presently, through the roaring of the wind comes the sound of a bell ringing for early prayer at the old parish church. It is like a sweet frail voice rising above the confusions and distresses of the earth, and refusing to be silenced. I lie awake in the darkness, thinking of all the dead generations which have heard that call to prayer, and have been comforted. "Only believe," says the bell, and I wonder if some day I shall find the meaning of that mystic message.

Suddenly I become aware of other sounds, nearer at hand. Steps pass my room and a door creaks on its hinge. I hear a whispering in the passage, and a sound of sobbing. The door of my room opens, and my Aunt stands there, very pale, with a candle in her hand.

"What is it, Aunt?" I cry, leaping out of bed.

"It is all over," she replies. "It came quite suddenly. She died in her sleep. O, Robert, Robert, she is gone."

CHAPTER XV

HERON'S STORY

YES, she was gone; and if she could but have vanished instantly, withdrawn like a cloud into the blue vastness, it would have been easier to bear. The old Scripture words rang in my mind, "He was not, because God took him." If she could have gone thus, if I could have entered her room, and found it simply empty of her presence, I could have acquiesced. It is the earthly afterwards of death that makes it so dreadful. It is the presence in the house of the discarded earthly form, this poor travesty of what was but yesterday tenanted and vital, that makes death terrible. It is this visible change from life to death that appals the senses; ah, if she could have but stepped into some chariot of fire or darkness, and waved her hand to us as she vanished on the roads of air, it could have been endured, for we could at least have thought of her as living.

And it is the horrible profanity of our actions toward the dead that makes death terrible; the gliding into the house of ghoul-like figures, the thought of strange hands mysteriously at work upon that unprotesting form, the stealth, the secrecy, the manufactured gloom of drawn blinds and sombre raiment. I sit in the old downstairs room, and it seems a sacrilege that the fire still burns brightly in the hearth. Upon the table is a box of black kid gloves, and a pile of neatly folded black silk "weepers." An offi-

cial person of obsequious manners hands out the gloves, and it is hard to recognise him as Miggs the draper. He is really quite pleased that he has obtained the order over the solicitation of Figgs, his business rival, but his aspect is one of impenetrable grief. He has new boots, which squeak, and every time they do so his mouth is drawn down in silent apology. Black-coated men come in, and stretch out large hands on which Miggs fits the black gloves, with an air of business alertness which he tries in vain to conceal. The black silk "weepers" are adjusted to shabby top-hats, and I see the owners of them secretly feel the silk that they may judge its quality. Miggs nods at them slyly, as though he said: "Yes, gentlemen, it is the best quality, you needn't be afraid; far better than Figgs could furnish, and when the sad event is over you need not be ashamed to show this silk to your wives." We are ushered to the door by Miggs, who walks on tiptoe, his boots still squeaking, and we ride up the street in carriages with drawn blinds. I notice in my carriage grains of rice upon the floor, and wonder for whose wedding it was last used, and whether the bride who rode in it foresaw for herself an hour like this. There is a confused waiting at the church door, and in the silence of the grave-yard a bird sings merrily, as if there were no such things as death. I could wish that rain were falling, that the day was dark and drear; this brightness of sun and sound of singing birds seem a heartless insult. And then, all at once, these impressions fade into insignificance. The organ plays soft music: the old solemn words fall on the ear—"I am the Resurrection and the Life." It is not the rector who is speaking: it is the Faith of Ages, speaking from the immemorial Past. And these black-coated men, who a moment since seemed so

trivial and mean, become part of a sacred pageant, which has moved across the earth since the dawn of the first day, and will do so until the last sun sets upon an empty world.

Through all the solemn service I remain observant of outward things. One part of me soars on the winged words of music, the other is closely vigilant of mundane reality. I am ashamed that this is so, but I cannot deny it. I see Mr. Wart in a front seat, surreptitiously making notes on the fly-leaf of his prayer-book, and I am sure he will have a funeral ode in his paper next Friday. I hear Mr. Miggs gently remonstrating with a mourner who persists in carrying his black gloves instead of wearing them, and I wonder whether it is because they are a misfit or from motives of economy. I notice that the Rector is reading badly, and I find Paul's elaborate argument for a resurrection tedious. I am sure that the congregation is bored also; that in no case could they understand this mystic talk of bodies celestial and bodies terrestrial, even if they would. Then, with a sudden contraction of the heart, a real physical pang, I hear a voice in my heart say, "Have you forgotten who it is that lies there so still?" At that word a veil of darkness falls between me and outward things. The black-coated men, fidgeting with their gloves, are magically changed. From each escapes a spirit; above each head the spiritual self soars; as they move to the door this procession of spirits accompanies them in the upper air, like a white mist; and in front of them a shape of special brightness, which I think is my mother. The whole scene is spectral. I also feel my flesh falling from me like a garment. . . . I walk the air to the rhythm of heavenly harps. . . . Paul's voice is pealing now like a great bell. It sounds across the centuries. From a

million graves voices answer it. It is as though an answering bell rang beneath the earth that covers them—a million dust-muffled bells replying to his great chime of Hope. Then I am flung back again to the world of fact. The Rector has closed the book. The feet of the bearers are shuffling down the aisle. I hear the creaking of Migg's new boots, and a wave of hysteric laughter rises in my throat, and turns to bitter tears. . . . It is in one of these instants of acute observation I see a ray of sunlight falling on a memorial tablet in the south aisle of the Church. Beside the tablet, outlined against its whiteness, is the pure oval of a young girl's face. It is a serious and sad face. The grey eyes are tearful, the sweet red lips quiver. Across the crowded church my eyes meet hers, are drawn for a moment into the grey depths of hers—and then the black-coated men intervene between me and the healing vision. Lucille, Lucille, is it you? Or are you, too, spectral—is this your sweet ghost? Bodies terrestrial—bodies celestial—is this your starry emanation, or the dear bodily presence? I cannot tell. The moment passes so swiftly that it is wholly dream-like.

"Lucille, is it you?" There is no reply. In the crowd round the grave I do not see you. And here I cannot think even of you—I am crushed under the inexorable reality of death, and the earth that falls upon the coffin is an avalanche beneath which I lie prone.

The last act of man's masque of mortality is played out. The mummers are at home again, stripped of their solemnity. The carriages that came so slowly up the street have rolled back again at a brisk trot. I am again in the house where I was born; but as I sit beside the fire and hear my Aunt discuss plans for my father's future, and as I lie awake at night, the

vision of that face outlined against the white tablet of the church comes back to me, and I think it real.

On the third day after the funeral life seemed to settle down again into its normal channels. It was like a river that had plunged in a great cataract, and now resumed its quiet flow. The new channel was deeper, and beads of foam upon the water told the story of past tumult, but the banks were unchanged.

One afternoon my father came with me on our usual walk along the coach-road, and back by the hill. It was a soft November day, with a warm sun and a south breeze. The wood-cutters were busy in the woods, and the rhythmic ring of their axes was the only sound that broke the silence. Coming down the hill we sat on a fallen tree, and my father began to talk with me. He began by speaking of himself.

"It's hard to readjust one's life after what has happened," he said, "but one's only chance of sanity lies in doing it as quickly and completely as possible. I thought at first I must give up everything. I see now that this would be a great folly. I think she would wish me to go on with my life here as though she were with me still. In any case I am too old for change."

"Couldn't you retire, father, and write the books you've always dreamed of writing?"

"I daresay I could. The school authorities might give me a small pension, and I've saved a little—enough to buy a small annuity. But I don't wish to, Robert. I should not be happy. I know now that I shall never write a book that will be worth anything."

I was touched by the hopelessness of his tone, and endeavoured to encourage him.

"No, no," he replied. "My life is not ended, but it is over. Don't think I'm complaining. I'm only fac-

ing a fact. But I am troubled about you, and what you mean to do with your life."

He looked at me with a kind of timid wistfulness, and then, as if making a great effort to conquer his natural reticence, continued:

"I'm not satisfied with your life. Are you, my dear boy?"

"No one is satisfied," I said evasively.

"But some have less reason to be satisfied than others. The man who is doing the best that is in him to do, may be satisfied that he can do no better. But I don't think you are doing your best, and I don't think you suppose you are."

"What is it you wish me to do, father?"

"You know my wish. I have always hoped that you would enter the Church. I spoke of buying an annuity. If I stay here at my work I shan't need to do it. The school will provide for all my wants. What I want to say is this, Robert. If you care to go to college and study for the Church, I think I can manage to find the money. I've saved enough to see you through. If more were needed, perhaps your Aunt would help. Will you tell me, quite frankly, if you feel you can do this?"

"Father, I couldn't take the money. Besides, I couldn't enter the Church. It's really impossible."

"Why is it impossible?"

"I don't know why, except that I feel it impossible."

"You might get over that feeling, if you tried."

"You mean I might force myself to do what my instinct tells me I ought not to do."

"I don't think I quite understand you," he said sadly.

"Perhaps I don't quite understand myself," I said, "but since you have been so frank with me, I'll be frank with you, father. A clergyman swears that he

believes certain doctrines and pledges himself to go on believing those doctrines as long as he lives. How can he be sure of that? Do forty or fifty years of life mean no new knowledge, and no change of view? How could I bind myself to the end of my days to believe what I may think I believe to-day? Father, it's impossible. I dare not answer for myself."

"Many great and good men have done it."

"They must answer for themselves, father. All I can say is that, if I did it, I should feel that I had sold my freedom of mind for a mess of pottage. Besides, the moment I had pledged myself to believe something unalterably, I'm quite sure I should begin to doubt it. The fact of having said, 'This is so, world without end,' would make me search for reasons why it wasn't so. It's like putting up a sign, warning people not to tread on the grass in a park. They don't think of treading on the grass till they see the sign: then they immediately want to do so, just because it's forbidden."

"I'm afraid you're a born rebel," said my father, with a smile.

"I'm your son," I laughed back.

"Well," he said, "I think I had the same thoughts at your age, and yet I don't know—I'm not sure they were justified. Besides, the Church to-day is allowing what it calls 'mental reservations.' It only asks general adherence to its doctrines, and allows freedom in details."

"I'm sure that wouldn't satisfy you, father."

"Well, no, it wouldn't. I see I have been arguing for the worse reason against the better. I must ask you to forgive me, my boy. But you see it's a little hard for me to give up my hopes concerning you. Perhaps I'm like your people in the park; I want to walk on the grass just because I know I ought not.

However, I'll say no more about it. But there is something else I have to say. I don't think you've begun to make the best use of your life yet. Writing a play such as your Aunt has described to me doesn't appear to me a very worthy thing. And even if you can't be a clergyman, you ought to use your life in some way for the public good. I think God expects that of us. I know I've failed in most of my ambitions, but I've begun to see that I've not failed altogether, because I've not been useless. To teach a generation of stupid boys the elements of knowledge is nothing to be very proud of, but it's some contribution to the wisdom of the world. I don't want you to be a schoolmaster, and you don't want to be a clergyman; but you've got to be useful somehow, or life won't be worth living."

"I feel that, father. I do indeed."

"Very well, then. I've something to tell you, but I wanted to have this talk with you first."

He drew a letter from his pocket, and went on:

"This is from Mr. Heron. He saw the news of my loss in some paper, and writes me most kindly. It seems he has met you, and he has told you we were schoolfellows."

"I met him quite casually in a picture-shop, and he invited me to his house."

"Well, it seems he has not forgotten you. There's a paragraph at the end of the letter that concerns you. You had better read it for yourself."

I took the letter, and read the following: "I have met your son. He told me he was teaching in some measly school that called itself an Academy. It's some weeks since I saw him, and whether he is still there or not I don't know. I should think you know too much about that kind of life to wish your son to live it. If you think in that way send him to me.

I don't make any promises, but if he suits me I could employ him as secretary for a time, and see what he is made of. Don't think I'm suggesting this from any benevolent motive. I'm not benevolent. Doing good doesn't suit my constitution. I've tried it, with bad results. It curses him that gives and him that takes. The law of profit is the only real law. So let it be understood this is a business proposition. I think your son might be useful to me, and I am not averse to being useful to him."

"That's just like Mr. Heron," I cried. "He's an optimist who plays at being a pessimist."

"Well, is he also a philanthropist who plays at being a misanthrope?"

"I'm sure I don't know, father."

"Nor I. It is a very curious letter. Did he ever tell you anything about himself?"

"Not a word. All I know of him is that he lives in an old house, collects books and pictures, and is a solitary."

"Poor old Heron!" said my father.

He was silent for some minutes. I could see that his mind was going back over a long road of years.

"What is he like now?" he asked.

"A little old man, with an iron-grey beard, rather shabby, with a growling voice and a suspicious eye."

"So that's what he's come to," said my father.

There was another silence, during which my father meditated.

"Well," he said at length, "I think I ought to tell you what I know about Mr. Heron, though I'm quite sure he wouldn't wish you to know. We were at school together, as you know. He was never a popular boy, for he had an exasperating tongue; and, besides this, he was small, and therefore much bullied. I took his part once, and from that hour he attached

himself to me with dog-like fidelity. Not that he was humble—far from it. He was much cleverer than I, and knew it. When we left school I lost sight of him for several years. I understood that his father was rich, that he was a manufacturer of a special paper used for bank-notes, and that Heron had become a member of the firm. He once asked me down to Witmarsh, a remote secret sort of village where the paper factory was concealed. He was full of talk about the mysterious process by which the bank-note paper was made and the immense precautions taken to guard the secret. Before we parted he told me he was going to be married. It seemed he had not told his father, and did not intend to.

“‘We all live in an atmosphere of secrecy here, so my marriage will be in keeping with the place,’ he said jokingly.

“‘Who was she?’ That he would not tell, but he informed me I might perhaps see her as we passed through the village. We were walking at the time over a brown heath which rose above the village, and the dusk was falling. As we came down the steep cart-track to the village we passed a small white house with a flowering garden that looked singularly well kept. A girl stood in the doorway who might have passed for an Italian. She had dark hair drawn in heavy bands round her forehead, dark eyebrows, and dark eyes; a perfect face, nobly moulded, but with a peculiar sadness—a kind of tragic questioning of fate and destiny. My glance was very brief, but it was enough to stamp her face upon my memory for ever. Heron whispered, ‘That is she.’ The girl’s face lit up as though the sun had touched it—just as the brown heath itself did at sunset. We did not stop to speak with her.

“‘Who is she?’ I asked.

" 'She is a stranger here,' said Heron. 'Her doctor has ordered her country air. Her name is Millicent Smith.'

"He did not mention her again, and the same night I left for Barton.

"A year later I took up a paper and saw an account of a great robbery that had taken place at Witmarsh. A large quantity of the special paper used for bank-notes had been stolen, and was being used to float spurious notes on the public. It seemed that the scheme had been concocted with great skill, and carried out with great success. The public was panic-stricken. To imitate the printing on a bank-note is not difficult, but no one had ever been able to imitate the water-lined paper. The thieves, once in possession of this special paper, could produce counterfeit notes of such excellence that it was almost impossible to detect the fraud. Witmarsh for a few days became the most notorious place in England. The papers gave long accounts of the jealousy with which the secret processes of manufacture were guarded, and it became evident that the theft could only have been accomplished by some one on the inside. Suspicion finally settled on Heron's wife. Her past history was searched. It was proved that she had had relations with some of the men who had circulated the counterfeit notes. She was put upon her trial. Her beauty made a great impression, and much sympathy was aroused by the fact that she was about to become a mother. Heron himself came under suspicion. The prosecution sought to prove that Millicent Smith was sent to Witmarsh as a decoy, and that her marriage to Heron was part of a deep-laid scheme. Heron refused to believe this, and was filled with indignation that such a thing should be suggested. What the real truth was no one ever knew. On the second

day of the trial Heron's wife was taken ill. She was delivered of a still-born child, and died three days later in prison. The counterfeiters who printed the notes were discovered and were sentenced to long terms of imprisonment. I wrote to Heron at the time of the trial, but got no reply. I heard some months afterward that he had left Witmarsh, and gone into business in London. For a long time after the trial I thought a great deal of Heron. I am sure he loved his wife dearly, and I am sure she loved him. There was no mistaking that look upon her face as she stood at the cottage-door; it is seen only in the eyes of a woman who loves. Of one thing I am quite sure, she was not playing a part in her love for Heron. Did she come to Witmarsh as an instrument in stronger and unscrupulous hands? Was there some occult force used to make her steal the paper? I don't know. One thing in the trial impressed me deeply. It was stated that when Millicent came into the dock, Heron pushed forward, kissed her hand, and made an infuriated protestation of her innocence, for which he was arrested and removed, on a charge of contempt of court. It was an heroic thing to do, for he must have known that it strengthened the suspicions against him. If his wife had not died, it is quite probable he would have been included in the criminal charge. I thought very often of this futile courageous outbreak of Heron's, and often pictured to myself the agony he must have endured. After a time the story died out of my mind, or at least the sharp impression faded. One thing only has remained vivid: the sense of something fine and indomitable in Heron. I saw him as a martyr who had survived martyrdom. It would have been much easier to die. That is the story of John Heron."

"A martyr who had survived martyrdom"—the

phrase held my mind. I seemed to see a broken body falling from a cross, gathering itself together, stumbling on torn feet down a blood-stained path. And this was Heron. This was the odd little man who seemed to have no passion in life but books and pictures.

My father appeared to read my thought.

"I suppose the last thing you ever suspected of Heron was that he had been crucified. It would be Heron's nature to conceal his wounds. There must be a great many John Herons in the world. When a man appears to be a misanthrope you'll generally find that his misanthropy is the fruit of some secret agony—a kind of ingrowing agony. Of course he had to find some kind of solace or he couldn't go on living. I suppose Heron's love of books and pictures is his form of solace."

"They certainly seem to content him," I remarked.

"Seem? Yes: but do they? No man is really contented with *things*. Things are a poor substitute for human love. Do you know, my boy, I suspect he has a real love for you? Of course, he wouldn't admit it. But through all the bitterness of his words I think I hear the cry of a human heart in pain—a lonely heart that is hungry for affection."

"Do you think, then, father, that I should accept Mr. Heron's offer?"

"That is for you to say. I only know Heron as he was many years ago. You know him as he is to-day. One thing I will say, however. I always found Heron severely truthful. Some men say a great deal more than they mean: Heron would say less on any matter that concerned his affections. The truth with him would lie deeper than his words."

"Well, I think I will go to him, father."

"Don't decide hastily, my boy. Don't let his sad

history affect your judgment too much. I only told it you because I thought you ought to understand something of Heron's real character."

"The story not only explains him, but it attracts me. It makes me feel I can trust him."

"Very well, then, go to him. Of course nothing may come of your association with him. But it is a new start in life, and I have a feeling that it may mean more than either of us supposes."

And so it was settled.

The axes of the wood-cutters were silent in the woods. Soft grey curtains were being drawn across the world. My father rose, and stood silent, gazing at the western sky, where one saffron bar lay, like an illumined road. His loneliness, his aspect of sad aloofness, touched me deeply, and I said:

"Father, I think I'll change my mind. I see I've been selfish. Let me stay with you. And if you really wish it, I'll take up teaching again, and maybe you'll find a place for me presently in the old school."

He grasped my hand, and his eyes were full of tears.

"No, no," he said. "That wouldn't do at all. I should be selfish indeed, if I wished that. Youth must find its own road. Yours lies yonder"—and he pointed to that pale illumined path that ran beneath the clouds, out into spaces infinite. "Mine is here."

He turned abruptly, and took the path down the hill, back to the empty house and the dull round of duty.

I followed him, thinking in my heart that there were more men than John Heron in the world who had been crucified, and still gone on.

CHAPTER XVI

CALLIPASH STREET

BEFORE I left Barton I met Mr. Overberg. He was perfectly friendly, and even went so far as to invite me into his private office. He enquired effusively about the health of my Aunt, but did not mention my father, from which I inferred that his preferences were guided by strict business considerations. I was somewhat surprised to find that he did not impress me as nearly such an imposing figure as I had imagined. He rubbed his big fleshy hands in quite the old manner, and was very suave and condescending, but I noticed with pride that I was as tall as he was, and that his dignity was distinctly provincial.

"So you're going away? Quite right, too. To be secretary to a rich man, I hear? And does your Aunt remain here, or go with you to London?"

"My Aunt remains in Barton for a few weeks, and then will live in London," I answered.

"A most estimable woman, your Aunt," he replied, rubbing his hands. "I may say a most remarkable woman, with a very shrewd mind, very shrewd."

I offered no opinion on this verdict.

"And you will live in London? The greatest city in the world, young man. I've often wished I had sought my fortune there when I was a young man."

"You often go to London, I suppose, sir?"

"Quite often. Business affairs. And my daughter is residing there, you know."

"Does she often come to Barton, sir?"

"Very infrequently. It is some months since she was here. She prefers London, and it is not improbable that some day I shall make my home there, too. Mrs. Overberg does not like Barton."

I was somewhat at a loss to understand why he should give me this information, but I felt sure he had some motive. The motive soon declared itself.

"And what did you say was the name of the gentleman to whom you will act as secretary?" he asked.

"Mr. John Heron," I replied.

"And he lives——?"

"At 13 Callipash Street, Westminster."

"A most interesting locality. I will make a note of the number. Some day I may have the pleasure of calling on you."

I could not see why he should wish to do anything of the kind and I had a sudden comic picture of William searching the stately form of Mr. Overberg.

"Do you know Mr. Heron, then?" I ventured.

"Heron—let me see—yes, I knew the name a great many years ago, but I can't think where. And so he's rich—a great responsibility to be rich, young man. Possibly he may need some help in his investments. If you should care to mention my name to him——"

"I know nothing of Mr. Heron's affairs," I said stiffly.

"A most commendable attitude. I appreciate your reticence. But as secretary you will, you know. However, I did not mean to talk business. I merely wanted to wish you Godspeed in your new life."

He waved his hands in quite a pontifical manner in uttering this pious sentiment, and we parted. It was not until I was outside the Bank that I began to suspect that the only reason why he had invited me into his office was to get information about Mr. Heron. I began to wonder if he really knew anything about

him, or what he knew. But these conjectures were instantly driven from my mind by another thought that rushed into it, and possessed it wholly. He had said Lucille had not been in Barton for some months. So that fair sweet face I had seen in the Church *was* spectral! It was Lucille's face, beyond doubt. And was it all unreal, a blessed hallucination, a vision projected by my own desire?—I was startled by the thought, and went down the street wondering what it meant, and whether even then she glided close beside me, benignant and unseen.

In due time I arrived at Callipash Street, and was received by William. The old man made no secret of the fact that he regarded me with extreme disfavour. My efforts to conciliate him produced no effect. He not only searched my pockets, but insisted on searching my trunk before he allowed it to go upstairs.

"It's all right, William," I said cheerfully. "You know I am to live here and be Mr. Heron's secretary."

"Sektry, indeed," he replied with scorn, "he don't want no sektry—not he. 'Tis my belief his mind is failing. Man and boy I done for him all these years, and what's he want a sektry for now I'd like to know?"

"To write his letters, I suppose, William."

"Letters! He don't write no letters. He 'avn't got nobody to write to. He be a lone man, an' I be a lone man, an' we don't want no young boys about us, a-trapesing round an' upsetting our ways."

"I promise you I won't upset you, William."

"Yes, you will," he answered viciously. "I know'd you for a born trapeser the moment I see you. You'll be a-trapesing up and down them there stairs all day, a-wearin' out the carpets an' makin' dust, I know you will. An' you'll be a-comin' in all hours as like as

not, an' how'm I to know who you brings in with you?"

"You needn't be afraid, William. No one is likely to call on me."

"O, they bain't, bain't they?" said the old man triumphantly. "Well, as it do happen, this very morn a certain person come here a-askin' for 'ee, but I soon druv that person orf."

"Who was it? What was he like?" I asked.

"I didn't say it were a he. It might or it might not have been a he. Similarly it might ha' been a she," said the old man with an air of elaborate cunning.

"Well, we'll say it was a she, then——"

"Which it weren't, so there. It were a young man, what said he know'd you, and if that's the sort of young man you knows, all I can say is I'm sorry for 'ee."

"Why, what was the matter with him?"

"He were a very gay young man, an' 'tis my belief he were drunk. Not angry drunk, so to speak, but silly drunk. He asked me if I'd ever heerd of old Father William, and I said I had not, but I'd heerd of the perlice."

"And you drove him off? How did you do that, William?"

"I swore at him very solemn-like. I used my biggest swear to 'ee. Likewise I takes the hall-broom, an' I knocks his 'at orf. Then I bangs the door to, and he went away."

William's narration of his own prowess had put him in a better temper. I knew perfectly well who my visitor was: it was Farthing, to whom I had given my new address. I had heard what William thought of Farthing. I wondered what Farthing thought of William.

Mr. Heron did not come home till nightfall, and I

spent the interval in a series of lively contests with William. He conceived it to be his duty not to let me out of his sight for a single moment. I had once complained that my Aunt took me into custody, but her attentions in that line were as nothing compared with William's. He insisted on being present in my bedroom when I unpacked my trunk, upon the contents of which he made a number of derogatory observations. At lunch, which consisted of bread and cheese, he served me with a single glass of the smallest beer imaginable; and sternly refused my request for a further supply of the innocuous liquid.

"If so be, you be a young man what looks upon the wine when it is red, like your friend whose 'at I bashed, you be come to the wrong house," he remarked.

I assured him that I could look upon this starveling beverage for a long time without evil results, which only led to the retort that it was good enough for Sektrys. It was evident that in his opinion anything was good enough for Sektrys, who were presumptuous persons whose pretensions to gentility were fraudulent, and whose pride could only be restrained by a low diet.

"I don't believe you really approve this beer yourself," I remarked genially.

"I allow there's better beer nor this," he replied. "There's three kinds of beer: there's Double X, and there's Mild, and there's Beer. This is just beer."

"Only just," I interpolated.

"An' good enough for Sektrys, and all you'll get till the master do come home. It ain't likely I'm going to waste the master's substance in riotous living for young prodigals what calls themselves Sektrys, by givin' of you Double X."

After this ascetic lunch I humbly asked William's

permission to go for a walk, but was sternly refused on the ground that I might not come back.

"But I thought you didn't want me here, William?"

"I don't," William replied with engaging frankness. "But my orders was to see you was looked arter. I'm a looking arter you. I've got you and I means to keep you."

I can't say I passed a comfortable afternoon with William. But it was certainly an amusing one. If I happened to look at a picture, William was instantly at my side, suspicious that I meant to steal it. When I was so injudicious as to take a small bronze figure in my hand, William glided towards me with a poker imperfectly concealed behind his back. If I sat down, I invariably sat upon the wrong chair, for it seemed that most of the chairs were not meant to be sat on, being too frail or too valuable for common use. I found myself gradually edged out into the hall, where a solid oak bench received my unworthy person. There I sat, as on the occasion of my first visit, with William standing sentinel over me at the top of the kitchen stairs. I studied certain prints that hung upon the walls till my eyes ached—notably a print of the Roman Forum which looked like a series of bedsteads, with their legs thrust up into the sky; and a St. Sebastian, who smiled so rapturously that one could only suppose he enjoyed being stuck full of arrows, and was perhaps born in this condition. I think I must have fallen asleep at last, for I confused a figure, clothed in complete armour which stood in one corner of the hall, with William who stood in the other, and was not in the least surprised to recognise William as a mediæval warrior, who was about to thrust his spear through my unwarlike breast. It was with a sense of profound surprise that I heard the door bang, and found it was not the Roman Forum

falling into dust, but only Mr. Heron come home to dinner.

Mr. Heron received me with a brusque cordiality, and we dined together in the big room which I had seen before. It appeared more crowded than ever with objects of art, and one had to move warily to avoid damage to the pictures which were stacked together on the floor. After dinner he amused me with stories of adventures in search of pictures. Several of these stories centred round a certain unscrupulous dealer called Stephen Crooks, whose character and actions Mr. Heron touched off with excellent irony, which lost nothing by his gruff mode of narration.

"Crooks was a big man," he said, "who always dressed in black broadcloth, with a wide shirt-front, in which he wore a single diamond. He had the manners of an undertaker, went to some measly conventicle every Sunday, carrying under his arm a flexible Bible—that patent sign of rascality. His appearance of piety was one of his chief assets. He was the most fluent and unctuous liar I ever knew. He made a fine art of lying, and looked all the time like a revivalist. One day a friend of mine went into his shop and was persuaded to buy what Crooks declared was a Hobbema. He paid a thousand guineas for it, and believed he had made a great bargain. About a week later he showed me the picture, and asked what I thought of it. Of course he expected me to praise it, and was much disconcerted when I did not do so.

"'Why, what's the matter?' said he.

"'Only that it's painted on mahogany,' I replied.

"'And what of that?'

"'Hobbema never painted on mahogany. He might have used oak, but never mahogany.'

"Back goes my friend hot-foot to Stephen Crooks.

" 'This thing isn't Hobbema,' he said angrily. 'Hobbema never painted on mahogany.'

"And here came in the diabolical astuteness of Crooks. He was grieved, deeply grieved. He looked more than ever like a revivalist whose motives are unjustly suspected. In all his long career as a picture-dealer he had never come upon this fact before, that Hobbema never painted on mahogany. He thanked my friend for the information. He was deeply thankful. Of course he would take the picture back—no honest man could do less. My friend, who had thought his thousand guineas irretrievably lost, was overwhelmed by this magnanimity. Crooks appeared to him as the finest type of honest dealer. He wore a halo. His big white face glowed with unctuous rectitude. As my friend left the shop, Crooks remarked: 'Of course I've been 'ad. I ought to have known better. But mark my words, sir, this is a copy, of course, but the genuine picture exists somewhere. If it costs me all my fortune I'll find the genuine Hobbema, and when I do, I will take the liberty of letting you know.'

"As soon as my friend left the shop, Crooks called one of his assistants and said: 'Go over to Robinson and Fisher's and buy an oak panel the size of this picture. Never mind what's painted on it, if the oak is old, buy it.' The assistant brought back the panel. Crooks then veneered the so-called Hobbema off the mahogany panel, and glued it down on the oak one. He put it aside for a year to harden. Then he wrote my friend and said he had discovered the genuine Hobbema. My friend came at once in great excitement. 'There, sir,' said Crooks, 'there's the genuine Hobbema at last, and what a time I've 'ad to find it! I've been half over Europe, an' have spent no end of money. I'm not going to ask you to take it, be-

cause I can't possibly sell it under fifteen hundred. But if you want it you can have it at that price, which I assure you is what it cost me.'

"My friend bought the picture—the same picture, of course. He has it still. I've never had the heart to undeceive him. Naturally he goes about saying that Crooks is the most honest dealer in London. I heard that Crooks gave a new organ to his chapel out of the profits. It would be just like him, and I've no doubt he'd sing to it with his most saintly expression, too."

Mr. Heron told this story with many chuckles, and several others of the same description. He would have gone on endlessly had not William appeared with a brass candlestick, and said solemnly: "Ten o'clock, Mr. Heron. Bed-time."

As he went upstairs he seemed to remember for the first time that I was supposed to be his secretary.

"To-morrow I must find you something to do," he said.

As he left me, he lifted up his candle so that its light fell full on my face, and added: "You look a good deal like your father, as I knew him forty years ago. Forty years, forty years—it's a long time ago.

"Out, out, brief candle,
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
And then is heard no more: it is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury
Signifying—nothing."

He recited Shakespeare's famous lines with an odd mixture of sarcasm and emotion. It was as though he felt deeply, and mocked his feelings. When I entered my room I sat a long time thinking of Mr. Heron and the story of his youth which my father had con-

fided to me. I wondered whether his passion for Art was not a mere device to fill the gap in his life left by his great tragedy. I surmised that my presence in his house might be meant to serve the same purpose. It did not seem likely that he had any real employment to offer me. It seemed presumptuous to suppose that he wanted me for my own sake. I did not know what to think. I had been used to simple characters. My parents, Mr. Wart, Farthing—all the people I had known, acted upon transparent motives. For the first time I was in contact with a character that was intricate, subtle, not plastic to hypothesis, a character with hidden depths in it. It was like passing from a flat country to a mountain country of deep gorges and thick woods, where the road is full of surprises. Of one thing I was sure: upon whatever motive Mr. Heron acted, the ostensible motive would never be the real motive; that he would guard from a fear of immodesty in its revelation.

In the days that followed I had plenty of time to study Mr. Heron, and the pursuit was so interesting that I gave but rare consideration to my own position in his household. As for employment, the only task which he found me was to prepare a catalogue of his pictures, for which he must have known I was singularly ill-fitted. I had not so much as an elementary knowledge of art, and the names of the great painters were entirely unknown to me. I believe, however, I must have manifested some intelligence, and a capacity for quick appreciation, which pleased Mr. Heron, although he jibed me mercilessly about my ignorance.

"I suppose your father thinks he's an educated man, and you think you're educated. And neither of you knows a thing about art! Didn't your father ever tell you anything about the great artists?"

"No, he didn't. But he taught me to read poetry."

"And what's that but poetry?" he cried, pushing under my nose a flower-piece by Van Huysum, on which the dewdrops sparkled, and a butterfly spread gorgeous wings, and the bloom on the rose-leaves seemed so real that one feared to touch it, lest it should be rubbed off. "Isn't that as fine a thing as anything a man can contrive out of words? Won't it last as long? Won't it give as much pleasure? I love to think of these old Dutch painters, and the infinite pains they took to reach perfection. They ground their own colours, mixed their own paints, even had flowing water round their studios to keep the air pure and prevent dust. Some of them were fools enough to go to Italy, and came back Italianised, and painted rubbish. The wise ones stayed at home and painted what they saw at their own doors, and their pictures are immortal. A great picture is the record of a soul in its attitude to the world. And yet we go on cramming the minds of boys with Latin, and never teach them anything about pictures. We are prouder of having invented a spinning-jenny than of having had a Turner in our midst. Bah! It's sickening! Humph!"

"Did you always love pictures?" I asked.

A shadow passed across his face.

"No, I didn't have the chance in early life. Perhaps that's why I want you to have it."

"I'm sure I'm grateful, and I'm willing to learn."

"Yes, yes, I believe you are. But I daresay you think me an old crank just the same.—No, no, don't apologise. I've no doubt I am. Wasn't it Emerson who said we are all gently mad? I'm a little madder than most folk, that is all, and in a better way. It's necessary in this vile world to be a little mad to live at all. If we were quite sane we should see things too clearly, and our hearts would break."

This is a sample of many conversations which I had with Mr. Heron. I gradually became aware not only of the quaintness of his views, but of the extraordinary reach of his mind. Up to this time I had never come into contact with a really superior mind, except in the case of my father, whose influence over me was largely traditional. The result had been a quite innocent sense of my own importance and superiority. In the presence of Mr. Heron I realised my true inferiority. What he knew about pictures was the least part of his knowledge. He was widely versed in literature, and, what is much more, he had worked out for himself a real philosophy of life. He saw things clearly, and for himself, without reference to opinion or convention. Very few people whom I have known have done that. Most people, and even educated people, are content to echo current opinion, and never think for themselves. Their minds are merely sensitive surfaces on which a thousand confused impressions are recorded. Mr. Heron's mind was not a passive surface on which things are written, but a vital intelligence that selected truth from a vast area. The opinions which he uttered might be right or wrong, but they were his own, and were the result of real mental processes. The result upon me was most stimulating. Because he really thought, he made me think, and taught me to distrust all conventional opinions.

One of his favourite sayings was that a man stood or fell to himself, and that no human creature could really do much to help another. Men must learn to settle things in the court of their own consciences before they would be really free. As long as we depended on others we could not be free. Freedom was only found in complete independence.

"But what about religion?" I ventured.

"Religion is the science of personal freedom," he answered, "but very few people regard it as such. Probably they are afraid to do so. It is much easier to be a slave than a free man. Freedom is too expensive for most men. Therefore, they 'prefer bondage with ease to strenuous liberty,' and they pay the clergyman to do their thinking for them."

"Then you've no use for the church?"

"On the contrary, I've more use than most men, because I understand better what it is meant to do, and what it cannot do. Let me see—this is Sunday morning,—I'm prepared to go to church with you at once, if you wish to."

I said I would be glad to do so, and he answered: "Very well, then. Let us go to the Abbey."

As we came out of Callipash Street I thought that I had never seen London look more repulsive. It created the image in my mind of a tipsy harlot waking up out of a Saturday night debauch; the gutters were strewn with rubbish; everything looked dishevelled, debased; the houses looked grimed and sordid; a grey sky hung low, and threatened rain. The few people in the streets walked with a depressed air, furtively unfolding umbrellas, and glancing at the grey sky with mute hostility. But as we neared the Abbey a magical change passed over all things. The mere fact of an open space wrought a liberation of the spirit. And then the sight of those majestic towers rising so solidly, defiant of time and change, the soft clash of bells in that upper air, the thought of the centuries that slept at their feet, like the soldiers round the tomb of an endless life—these things stirred the imagination, and put a new atmosphere round the mind. And inside the Abbey what a sense of sudden peace! The voice of the organ rose high into those solemn arches, like a soul made free. The great figures of soldiers, states-

men, patriots, heroes, seemed to turn their marble faces toward the heavenly sound, and strain upward, listening. As to the service, I heard nothing but the soft echo of a human voice in those vast spaces. It seemed a thing too frail and insignificant for such a temple. The real voices were the silent voices—the immemorial Past that breathed around us. I was deeply moved, as tens of thousands have been moved, by the sense of something eternal that dwelt there, with a changeless message for the human soul.

"Well?" said Mr. Heron, as we came out.

"It's wonderful," I answered in a low voice, for the awe of all this majesty lay upon my spirit.

"Yes," he replied. "Religion is the romance of the infinite. Never think you can do without it, for you can't. It's the only real poetry. And if I don't say much about it, understand it is because I hold it too sacred. Strange to think that a nation that has Westminster Abbey can find its chief pride in the beastly growth of factories. Some day they'll know better, I think. War and famine, and sorrow and agony will scourge them back to the Abbey. They'll find out that man can't live without the romance of the infinite."

He was very silent all that evening. I think he was a little ashamed of having spoken with so much emotion.

As he sat by the fire quietly reading, I had for the first time a true intuition of his real relation to me. It was obvious that my work of cataloguing his art collection was a mere pretence. Was the real purpose he had in view to shape my character? Was his wish to have me with him the desire of a lonely childless man to impress himself on some other soul before he went hence and was no more seen?

Man desires immortality, but he has various ways

of seeking it. The most practical method is to go on living through some other life which is the prolongation of his own intention, purposes, and sympathies. That, at least, is real. The only real death is to die childless.

Was it because Mr. Heron had no son that he had sought me out?

A great tenderness filled my heart as I thought of this. That night there sprang up in my heart the beginnings of a real love for Mr. Heron.

CHAPTER XVII

THE MIRACULOUS HOUR

AND it was in Westminster Abbey that the great miracle happened—I met Lucille.

It was on a Sunday afternoon. The anthem had just ceased, and the high fluting notes of the boy-choir still echoed in the great roof. People who had come for the music alone were beginning to leave, indifferent to the white-robed priest who stood silent in the pulpit. Half-a-dozen persons, obviously of the provincial tourist class, moved from the row of chairs immediately in front of mine, and left noisily. It was then I saw her, at first with nothing more than a perplexed sense of reminiscence. She wore a broad grey hat, under which masses of fair hair were coiled, and a simple grey dress. She sat very silent, listening to the preacher, her hands folded in her lap. At some gesture, some emphatic word of the preacher, she turned her head slightly, and instantly I knew her. I caught a glimpse of the dark grey eyes, with their long lashes, and all the sweetness of that visionary face I had seen in the old church at Barton on the day of my mother's funeral. My heart began to beat with a violent joy. She had settled back again into her listening attitude, and her face was withdrawn. The preacher had closed his discourse, and the chords of a familiar hymn vibrated through the Abbey. She rose, and this time I saw her face more clearly. I moved quietly into the chair immediately behind her; I was so close now that I could perceive the fragrance

of her dress, and could have touched those coils of shining hair. She was kneeling now. A deep silence lay upon the congregation, and then my lips whispered her name—Lucille, Lucille!—She rose from prayer, and turned round with a startled glance.

“Lucille, Lucille!”

The grey eyes met mine with an adorable shyness, and drooped before my ardent gaze.

“I am Robert Shenstone,” I whispered.

“Robert.” Her lips formed rather than said the words. Her hand rested in mine for an instant, her face was the colour of a rose, and then she regained a complete composure.

“How strange to meet you here,” she said.

“And you,” I answered.

We were caught in the crowd moving to the door, but in those brief moments I knew that something wonderful had happened to me. That lamp, lit long ago in my childish heart, burned up clear and strong. Did she know that it was there? Did she too feel the wonder of the moment?

For the first time I became conscious that she was not alone. A prim elderly woman moved beside her, with the air of a dragon guarding a treasure. She took Lucille’s arm, and intercepted my glance with one of entire disfavour.

Lucille smiled, and in her eyes was that expression of lurking mischief which I remembered in the days when she ran away from me at Barton.

“This is Mr. Robert Shenstone, whom I knew in Barton,” she said quietly. “Mr. Shenstone, this is my Aunt.”

The dragon sniffed.

Fortunately the crowd at the door divided her from the dragon for a moment, and I had time to whisper, “Lucille, I want to talk to you. Don’t go.”

"I can't stop. Aunt won't let me," she replied.

"But I must talk with you. Can't you meet me somewhere? Here, in the Abbey, to-morrow afternoon. Do say yes."

"Perhaps," she whispered.

The dragon had reclaimed her. It was a very stately dragon, I observed, with a very stiff and narrow back, profusely clothed in sharp jet beads, which rattled as she moved, and shone like veritable scales. That she could have any blood relationship with the delicate and fair form that moved beside her, appeared an insult to reason and heredity. But there was no doubt that Lucille was her prisoner, and that I was regarded as an audacious and improper person, whose claims to acquaintanceship were offensive. Nevertheless Lucille had said 'perhaps.' And she looked back once—as if to reiterate this poor half-promise. And then the two vanished in the crowd, crossing the road toward the Park, and I took my solitary way to Mr. Heron's.

I met her in the Abbey the next afternoon.

For an agitated hour I had waited, watching the transept door, making excursions hither and thither, fancying I saw her grey dress among the groups of visitors who gather round historic monuments; blaming myself that I had named no special spot in the vast building for our tryst, and recounting the thousand chances that I might miss her. My wanderings had brought me to the Poet's Corner, as the likeliest place to find her, and here I stood disconsolate, when suddenly I saw her coming toward me. She moved with the lightness of a bird, with a sort of airy grace, and I could have fancied all those great dead poets, who had sung so passionately of lyric love, straining upward from their houses of dust to gaze upon her. I could have fancied their dead lips once more the

porches of sweet song, a sort of silent music floating out from each bust and tablet, and dying in a harp-note of ecstatic welcome. And then she stood before me, shy and blushing, and her hand trembled into mine.

I don't know what we talked of in those first minutes of our meeting: perhaps we didn't talk at all. We were simply conscious of how large a space of time and experience lay between us; a sort of gulf, over which our souls strained toward each other, infinitely curious and eager.

She was the first to recover self-possession, and before I knew it we were talking quietly of Barton. It was part of her tact—that most exquisite gift of woman—thus to put me at my ease, by recalling common memories.

"So your mother is dead: I hadn't heard of that," she said softly, when I came to that part of my story.

"And I know I didn't love her enough," I said.

"We all feel like that," she replied. "Did you ever meet these lines:

"In this dim world of clouding cares
We rarely know till wildered eyes
See white wings lessening up the skies,
The angels with us unawares."

"No. Who wrote them?"

"Gerald Massey."

"So you read poetry, Lucille?"

"Yes, I am very fond of it. So is my Aunt, though you would never think it. Alexander Pope is her favourite poet. It's only by the chance of knowing some one who lives near Thring where Massey lives, that she tolerates Massey's poems in her house."

She smiled as she spoke, and I had so clear a vision

of a prim elderly dragon, clothed in shining jet scales, sitting very upright in a spotless parlour, reading Pope's chill didactics, that I ventured to ask if she was happy in her Aunt's house.

"O, not happy, and not unhappy," she replied. "I am being educated, you know. Father didn't want me to stay at the school where he sent me, so I live with my Aunt, and have governesses. It's rather dull sometimes; but my Aunt is really kind, though I often want my mother."

"The Make-believe Mother?"

"O, do you remember that? I used to say that when I was a very little girl, didn't I?"

"I remember everything you ever said to me, Lucille."

"Do you? That is very sweet of you. No, it's not the Make-believe Mother—it's the other mother who 'went away.'"

There was just the faint suspicion of that childish lisp of hers in the way she said 'very sweet,' and it had the effect of restoring to me, as if by magic, all that old childish relationship I had had with her.

"O Lucille," I cried, "do you know I really loved you in those old Barton days, and I've loved you ever since, and I love you more than ever now?"

"I sometimes thought you did," she said in a low voice, "and I've been glad to think it. But you mustn't, Robert. You must forget me."

"Why, Lucille? Is it because I'm not good enough? Of course I know I'm not that, and never can be."

"No, it's not that. It's something else, quite different."

"What is it, Lucille? Is it because you don't care for me?"

"Not that, Robert."

"Then, if you really care for me, Lucille, nothing else matters."

I took her hand, and she let it lie a moment in mine. Then I saw that her eyes were full of tears.

"Please let me go. You really must, you know. I want my hand to wipe my eyes."

She smiled up at me with a bewitching trouble.

"No, no, Lucille, I must know why you're unhappy. If you don't tell me, I shall go away thinking it is my fault that you are crying."

"It's not your fault then. It's my fault. I ought not to have met you. But I was so lonely that I couldn't help coming."

"And you're less lonely now? Well, that's something."

"Yes, I am glad to know there's some one in London who cares for me. But we ought not to have met."

"Why not, dear? Won't you tell me?"

"Not to-day. Perhaps another day."

"To-morrow?"

"No, I'm being governessed all day. On Saturday, perhaps."

That was something gained, at least, and I was wise enough to be content with it.

"I must go now," she said.

"Let me walk with you, Lucille."

"Yes, if you like. There can be no harm in that."

We went out into the sunlight, and it seemed as though she at once became a child again, and perhaps I did, too. London had suddenly put on gay raiment, and the old houses were like tall flowers swaying to and fro in the warm air. She herself looked like a flower, her fair hair like the golden corolla of a flower, under the grey calyx of her hat. She was slender as a flower, and as warmly perfumed. I wondered why every passer-by did not turn to look at her; had the

very houses grouped themselves in processional array to watch her pass it would have seemed but natural.

We entered St. James's Park, and watched the children at play and the broad reflections on the still water, talking all the time of Barton and its ways, each ready with the "Do you remember?" of mutual reminiscence. Here was one bond that was sure: perhaps it was the surest of all. And yet all the time I was conscious that Lucille had to be rediscovered. I had left her a little girl, and now she was a woman. Many things had gone to her making, many emotions and experiences of which I knew nothing. I found myself taking silent note of her, the perfect contour of her face, its sweet gravity, the delicate pencilling of her eyebrows, the frank grey eyes, the ripple in her hair around the temples,—all those features of her grace and beauty, some unchanged from childhood, but more, as it seemed to me, entirely new. It was in her voice that I found most of the Lucille I had known, perhaps because the voice is after all the most expressive organ of the soul. It was low and sweet, with certain mocking notes, gay challenges and provocations, and she still lisped a little over certain words. Here was the Lucille whose spirit seemed made of laughter when she dared me to kiss her under the Town-hall of Barton; but in the voice of this new Lucille were notes of sadness, of yearning, which came from a soul of whose emotions I was ignorant. In a mute way I was conscious of those things as we walked together; at one moment we were laughing children, and a little later some chance word struck a chord almost tragic.

We crossed the Park into Piccadilly, and at last came to a dim old street wedged in behind the stately mansions of Hanover Square. It was short and crooked, and the tall narrow houses looked as though

they had been fighting for elbow-room for generations and had never got it. "Fit home for a dragon with a narrow back decorated with scales of jet," I thought; "but not for so fair and young a creature as Lucille."

She stopped at the end of the street. "I will say good-bye here," she said.

"May I not come to the door, Lucille?"

"It's better not," she laughed. "My Aunt is very particular, and forbids 'followers.'"

"Am I to be considered a follower?" I asked.

"It looks as if you are one," she said demurely. "Appearances are against you."

She nodded brightly, and went up the street to a house that seemed the narrowest of all, where she stopped, waved her hand, and vanished.

I made a note of the number—19½ Vickers Street—and wondered where the other half was, or whether it had ever existed. Perhaps it had been wedged out long ago by lateral pressure.

I suppose it was because my mind was so full of Lucille that I began after dinner to talk to Mr. Heron about Barton. I had an idea that in this way I could introduce the name of Lucille, for the mere joy of uttering it, of course, for I did not suppose Mr. Heron would take the least interest in a love affair.

"Were you ever in Barton?" I asked.

"Barton? Certainly not. Why should I be? Don't you know I've never been out of London for thirty years? And never want to. Humph!"

He adjusted his spectacles and took up the book he had been reading; then, as if conscious that he had answered me too brusquely, put his book down again, and said, "I suppose you were rather fond of it, eh? But it puzzles me how people live in such places."

"My father seems content," I replied.

"Yes, and if he hadn't been content, he'd have been a much greater man. There's nothing puts out the fires of the soul so soon as content."

"O, he wanted to get out, and tried. It was only when he knew he couldn't get out that he became content. I suppose he got used to the people."

"The people! Who? Who are the people in such a place? Not an idea among a hundred of 'em, I'll be bound. A fine place for a scholar!"

"They're not all as bad as you think," I replied. "There's Mr. Wart, the editor, who published my poems, you know. And there's Mr. Overberg, the banker——"

I was conscious of a curious change in Mr. Heron. He was sitting bolt upright, and his book had fallen to the ground with a crash. The colour had left his face, and his eyes were dilated. They appeared to be staring into mine, but I knew that they were looking not at me, but at some vision his mind had conjured up. He rose suddenly, and went to the fireplace, on the pretence of adjusting a log which was smoking. When he turned round again his face was still pale, but its startled expression had gone.

"Mr. Overberg, the banker, did you say? I shouldn't have thought Barton was big enough to boast a genuine banker. What sort of man is he?"

"A large man, black whiskers going grey, always dressed in black, large fleshy hands which he rubs together when he talks—I think that describes him."

"It certainly does," said Mr. Heron with a grim attempt at a smile.

"He told me when I came away that some day he might do himself the pleasure of calling on you. He thought he might assist you in your investments."

"O, he did, did he? Like his impudence. What did you say his name was?"

"Overberg."

"Very good. I'll instruct William not to let him in when he comes. You've a singular gift of description, Robert. Do you know you've painted a most convincing portrait of a damned scoundrel?"

He spoke with so much heat that I was astonished. I could not believe that there was anything in what I had said to account for this burst of anger. Then, there was the curious change that had passed over Mr. Heron's face at the mention of the banker's name. It was the face of a man who had received a great shock of some kind. A man who had had a sudden knife plunged into his heart might have looked so. I was alarmed and uneasy, though I could not have explained why.

Mr. Heron seemed resolved to give me no further clue to his agitation. He took up his book again, and soon appeared to be absorbed in it. Beyond a faint trembling of his hand as he turned the pages there was no sign of agitation. I felt ashamed that I had allowed myself to notice even this: it seemed like spying on him. William came at ten o'clock with his summons of "Bed, Mr. Heron," and we parted as usual with the utmost friendliness. But as I lay in bed that night I found myself puzzling hopelessly over the problem, and wondering if Mr. Heron had not at some time or other met Mr. Overberg, and had cause to dislike him.

If Mr. Heron had been observant he would have noticed in me during the next few days an appalling inattention to the business of catalogue-making. I was restless and disturbed, and could fix my mind on no detail of my daily work. What did Mr. Heron's pictures matter to me? My imagination held another picture, finer than any painter had ever painted, the sweet face of Lucille. Immediately after lunch I

rushed out, and walked endless miles in the vain hope that somewhere I might meet Lucille. I haunted Regent Street and Oxford Circus; I stood for half an hour at a time outside famous shops, telling myself that sooner or later Lucille must appear. Again and again I thought I saw her grey hat in the distance, and followed it to my disappointment. At nightfall I sought Vickers Street. I was so constant a visitor that the policeman on his beat came to regard me with suspicion.

"Now, young man," he said at last. "What are you a-doin' of? Don't you know you're a-loiterin' and a-lingerin' in a public place, which is agin the lor?"

"I'm not doing any harm," I protested.

"It's my conviction you ain't up to no good," he replied.

"Well then, I'm waiting for a lady, if you must know."

"Sweetheart, eh?" he said with a grin.

"Maybe. We'll let it go at that."

"Well, I ain't a-sayin' that you ain't. 'Tis something that may happen to anybody. But how am I to know?"

I observed that he had a very large hand, and that it was extended toward me, palm upward, in an attitude that might suggest expectation. I had a brief dealing with the large hand which need not be recorded. He appeared to be too absorbed in a study of the stars to be quite aware of what had happened.

"It's a beautiful night," he observed irrelevantly.

"It is," I answered with conviction.

He moved off cumbrously, and left me gazing at the windows of 19½, wondering which was Lucille's. All was dark. The house looked uninhabited. Well,

perhaps she slept at the back of the house—or was she sick—was she dead? Through my crazy imagination rushed all sorts of tragic pictures—a fiery frieze of calamitous events, all of which seemed both possible and probable. I heard the policeman coming back—a deaf man might have heard the reverberation of those boots half a mile away. I could not face him, and fled precipitately.

Saturday came at last, the long-desired, the impossible Saturday. It seemed a kind of miracle that the sun rose, that the world had lasted so long. Supposing it had ended before I met Lucille? It must end some day: I was humbly thankful that it still endured, and regarded its continuance as a special providence. I was disposed to make a bargain with the Powers, that they might do what they liked about the ending of the world, if they would only let it last long enough for me to meet Lucille. They must have heard my prayer, for Saturday afternoon found the great cataclysm still postponed. London sat unchanged beside her flowing river; to me alone it was transfigured. The river sang a love-song as it danced beneath the ancient bridges, and rose-flames topped the domes and towers and steeples.

Lucille came. Her hand lay again in mine. We sat again close to Poet's Corner, I eager and flushed, she very still and calm.

It was some time before I became aware of this peculiar stillness. It affected me at last with the sense of a crystal barrier that rose between us.

"Why are you so silent?" I asked.

"Am I?" she answered.

"Aren't you glad to see me, Lucille?"

"Yes, I am glad, very glad."

She moved a little closer to me, and I could feel her dear hand trembling as it lay in mine.

"O, if you only knew how much I have wanted you—how long it has seemed since last Monday."

"It has been longer to me," she said quietly. "I have had to think a great deal, with no one to help me."

"I've been outside your house every night. I have wondered if you were sick or dead. You don't know how I have tortured myself."

"Poor boy," she said. "Did you indeed think so much about me?"

"I have thought of nothing else. All my life I shall think of you, and you only."

She moved a little away from me, and looked at me with wistful eyes.

"That's why I must speak to you, and speak now. I didn't mean to, but I must. O, but it's too hard!"

"What is it you have to say that's hard, dear? Is it that you don't love me?"

"No, not that. I told you that before."

"Then what is it?"

She hesitated a moment: then drew from her breast a small miniature set in diamonds. It represented a young and beautiful woman; light brown hair was piled over a wide low forehead, the lips were closed firmly, and the eyes were sad.

"That was my mother," she said.

"The mother who 'went away'? Do you remember you——"

She interrupted me.

"Yes, she went away. I don't know why or how. Father has never told me. But I am old enough now to know that there was some dreadful shame and disgrace. My Aunt knows what it was, but she won't tell me. I must know. I can't be happy till I do: perhaps not even then—perhaps much unhappier. I lie awake at night and think till I can think no more.

And Robert, don't you see I can't love any one while that disgrace hangs over me? If I had been brought up differently I think I might enter some religious sisterhood. But I know I'm not good enough for that. I do so love life, but O, I can't let myself love life when I think that perhaps somewhere not far from me is my own mother, poor and despised and disgraced, and perhaps unjustly."

She was weeping, and I was too overwhelmed with surprise to say a word.

"So you mustn't think of me, Robert," she went on. "We mustn't meet like this. I've come twice. I couldn't help coming—but I must not come again."

I found my speech at that, and broke out into a storm of hot protesting words.

"No, no," she said—"it's very sweet of you to say all this—and she lisped over the word sweet just as she did when she was a child—but I have thought it all out. I shan't change my mind."

"O, I know what it all means," I said bitterly. "You're afraid your father won't approve of me because I'm poor."

"If you think that, I can't help it," she said. And then she added with a proud glance, "What I approve is the chief thing. My father couldn't alter my feelings by anything that he might say or do. I've been lonely so long that I've learned to think my own thoughts, and choose my own course."

"It's a wrong course," I pleaded. "It can't be right that you should sacrifice yourself to this phantom disgrace that lurks in the far past."

"It is very real to me," she replied. "If it should ever be removed——"

I took up the unfinished sentence.

"Then you would let yourself love me? Is that what you mean, Lucille?"

"Yes," she whispered.

She had risen. She put her hands on my shoulders, and said, "Isn't that enough?"

We turned slowly and went out of the Abbey, hand in hand, like two children. Far away, probably in a choir-room, voices were rehearsing the anthem for Sunday. Otherwise the great building was silent, and there was no one to be seen but a drowsy verger. I kissed her hand, and we passed into the crowded streets.

CHAPTER XVIII

CROSS CURRENTS

My Aunt returned to London a week later, and settled down in my old rooms at Mrs. Trudge's. Why she should have stuck to Mrs. Trudge I don't know, except on general grounds of perversity. I could understand that she wished to live there to play guardian angel to me; but that she should do so out of love for Mrs. Trudge seemed highly improbable. I rather think some sentiment that had to do with the late Mr. Shanley and Lambeth was at the root of her conduct; although she would never have confessed it. However, there she was, and I was informed of the fact in a curt letter, which was less an invitation than a command to visit her at once.

I did so, and found her in my old attic, sitting at the window in full view of the dome of Bedlam. The room had undergone great changes; a bright new carpet covered the floor, prints of American Civil War soldiers were on the walls, and flowers were in the window. In the centre of the room was a large table, with a pot of ink, some new pens, and a ream of foolscap paper conspicuously displayed. Mrs. Trudge had followed me upstairs with the same old black teapot, and many loud ejaculations on my personal appearance, interspersed with recollections of my former habits, which I strove in vain to suppress.

"You may put the tea down," said my Aunt severely.

"Which I was about to do, not being one as wishes

to h'intrude upon a famerly gatherin', so to speak, but I must say as 'e don't look well, in spite of 'is new clothes——"

"I'm very well indeed," I interrupted.

"No doubt you think so, which I'm sure I 'ope is true, but many a rose has a worm in it, unbeknown, and them as looks best ain't strongest, bein' like cab-bages, which the bigger they are, the more sure they are to be rotten in the middle——"

I have no doubt she would have gone on for half an hour, demonstrating to her own satisfaction that I was the victim of the most insidious diseases, had not my Aunt risen suddenly, looked out of the window, and cried in the most melodramatic fashion, "Cats."

"Cats! Where?" exclaimed Mrs. Trudge.

"In your garden, to be sure, rooting up your flowers."

The said garden was about four yards square, and was the pride of Mrs. Trudge's heart.

"A tabby and a tortoise-shell," said my Aunt.

"I'll tabby 'im if I catch 'im," said Mrs. Trudge wrathfully. "An' as for that there tortoise, a great yellow beast, with 'is 'air 'arf wore off with fightin' on roofs, I'll pizen 'im."

She trundled off at unusual speed, and my Aunt smiled grimly.

"I've found out how to get rid of Mrs. Trudge, you see. Thank God I can always stop her tongue by mentioning cats."

"I don't think I ever noticed them."

"You wouldn't. Men never do notice things that aren't right under their noses."

"O, I'm not as bad as that," I laughed. "I notice you've got a new carpet, and all kinds of things I never dreamed of, including new pens, ink, and an impressive pile of foolscap."

"That's for you," she said, pointing to the table.

"For me, Aunt!"

"Yes, for you. I've made up my mind you're wasting your time at Mr. Heron's. If he likes to pay you a salary for wasting your time, that's his affair. I'll be bound you haven't written anything of your own for the last three months."

"I've been cataloguing pictures."

"And much good may that do you. I thought you told me you intended to be a writer. Nothing would do but you must write books. The Church didn't suit you, and schoolmastering you detested—you must be a writer. Well, I'm going to see you are one. I got that table on purpose for you. And I expect you to come here every day for at least three hours and write."

"But, Aunt——"

"But me no buts," said my Aunt. "Do you know what your chief fault is?"

"Do you?"

"Of course I do. It doesn't take long to find that out. It's drifting."

"Drifting?——"

"That's what I said, and you know very well it's true. Have you ever chosen a course for yourself? Not you. You drifted into schoolmastering, and drifted into playwriting, and now you've drifted into a snug harbour at Mr. Heron's. Do you suppose you'll make anything of your life if you go on like this? People who really do things in the world always begin by knowing just what they want to do. They've got aim. They work. If you mean to be a writer, you've got to work."

She rose, and crossing the room, stood before the portrait of one of the Civil War generals that adorned the wall.

"Do you see this portrait?" she continued. "It's a clever face, isn't it? That's McClellan. They called him the little Napoleon, and expected all kinds of great things from him. But he was a drifter. He never quite knew what he wanted to do, and in the end did nothing. He had a fine army and did nothing with it. One day Abraham Lincoln sent him a telegram, saying that if General McClellan wasn't using his army that afternoon, he, Abraham Lincoln, would be glad to borrow it, just to see what he could do with it. It's not much use having all the talents if you do nothing with them, is it?"

"I'm sure I've really and sincerely wanted to be a writer, Aunt."

"Wanted," she said scornfully. "Children want the moon, but they don't get it. The only people who get things in this world are those who go after them. Now don't think I'm harsh in talking to you like this. I know what I'm talking about. I married a drifter. Did I ever tell you anything about Shanley?"

"Not much."

"Well, sit down, and let me tell you something. Shanley, when I first knew him, was the kind of man of whom every one said, 'He has a brilliant future before him.' By the time he was forty people were saying, 'He has a brilliant future behind him.' He had genius but no perseverance. He was satisfied with small successes. I believe he might have been the first playwright of his time, but he never took himself seriously. He knocked off his plays at a great rate, and never really worked at them. The result was that he never improved. Indeed, as time went on, he simply repeated himself, and always with lessened force. Other men, with not half his ability, forged ahead of him because they took pains. He became what they call in America, a back number: and that meant pov-

erty, and the miserable wandering life we had to live finally, going from place to place, with old plays that had lost their popularity. It's just because I know what all that means, because I was the wife of a Drifter, that I'm determined you shan't drift."

I had a sudden vivid vision of the life my Aunt described, its mortifications and its futility, and the way in which her proud spirit must have suffered. And I began to see myself, especially in relation to Lucille. What had I to give her, if she ever agreed to marry me? Hers also was a proud spirit, and I could guess how she might feel and act if ever she discovered my incompetence. Such a discovery might inflict a fatal blow on love, or it might turn it into the contemptuous pity which my Aunt felt for Shanley.

"You are no longer a boy," said my Aunt. "You are almost a man, and have a man's part to play. Have you thought of that?"

"Very often," I said. "But really, you know, there didn't seem anything else for me to do but accept Mr. Heron's offer."

"I admit that. But your position with Mr. Heron is only temporary. You must look beyond that. The question is, do you really want to be a writer? If you do, you must begin to take yourself seriously, as Shanley never did."

"But I don't know what I want to write."

"Begin to write, and you'll find that out. That's why I want you to come here every day and try. I've thought all this out, Robert. At first I thought I ought to stay with your father, for he's lonely and needs me. Then I remembered that you needed me more than he does. His life is finished. He'll never change now. But your life is beginning, and I want to see it succeed."

In these last words there was a note of such real

and deep affection that I was moved. I put my arms round my Aunt's neck and kissed her, and her stern lined face became wonderfully softened into tenderness.

"I never had a child," she said, with a catch in her voice. "I know I can never take the place of your mother, but I'd like you to think of me in that way, if you can, my dear."

"I'll try," I said, with unconscious cruelty.

"Will it be so very hard?" she replied.

"It won't be hard at all," I answered, "for I love you. You've always been so good to me."

"Well," she said, "I've always meant to be, but you know you're something of a problem. If I were good to you in the usual way, I suppose I should give you money, and let you do as you like with it, and I know very well that would be the surest way to do you harm."

"I wouldn't take it," I said proudly.

"Well, I wouldn't give it, so don't worry," she said with an emphatic nod of the head.

We both laughed over the retort.

"But I want to give you what's better than money—opportunity," she continued. "Try to write a really good play or a novel, anything you like, so long as you do your best at it. It seems to me you've plenty of material right here in Lambeth. All the comedy and tragedy of life is at our doors. See whether you can't do something with it. You won't starve, at all events, while you're experimenting, for I'll stand behind you. Only remember I intend to be a hard master, and you'll have to work hard to satisfy me.—No Shanleying, you know——"

The old formula sounded almost pathetic—perhaps because I knew more now of all that it implied.

"Well, Aunt, I'll do my best," I said.

And so it was settled between us. I put the matter to Mr. Heron that night, and found him agreeable to the new arrangement.

"Of course," he said, "I know you've not enough here to fill your time. Your Aunt's idea is a very sensible one, though I don't see why you can't write here as well as there, if you want to. However, do what she wishes, and when you've written anything you'd like to show me, remember I'll be glad to see it."

From this point a new chapter in my life began, dominated by three distinct and sometimes clashing interests.

The first and chief was Lucille. She had come suddenly into my life, and as suddenly vanished. It was in vain that I haunted the Abbey, walked, eagerly watchful, through crowded thoroughfares, and hung about Vickers Street—I caught no glimpse of her. My friend the policeman gave the quietus to my hopes of meeting her. Coming upon me at the corner of Vickers Street one evening, he observed me with a kind of paternal sadness for some minutes, and then remarked that I appeared lonely. I admitted that I was, to which he responded that it was hard to have to wait for a lady what didn't come.

"Which 'ouse might it be that she lives in, sir?"

"Number 19½," I responded.

"Why bless my soul," he replied, "didn't you know that there 'ouse was h'empty?"

"It looks much as usual."

"It do, sir, they being people that's very retirin' and keeps their blinds down most always. But they've gone. I see them go two days ago. A young lady and a old one, four-wheel cab, lots of luggage, off to the seaside or maybe gone abroad, can't say which, but you may take it from me they've gone. I would ha'

thought they'd 'ave let you know, unless, so to speak, you're what they call clandestine."

I did not care to admit that I was clandestine, so I replied that they had no doubt forgotten to inform me of their departure.

"That were very careless of 'em, very careless," he replied with a grin. "But," he added, "there's no accounting for wimming, partiklar in the ways they treat young men. Treat them like h'old shoes, they does, to be throw'd away when done with. Such is my h'observation."

I was too sick at heart to encourage him in a garburity which I felt to be imminent. But because he was lonely he was not to be deterred from talk, and went on to remark that in his public capacity he saw a deal of life, and that he might be trusted to know his way about, especially in relation to women.

"An' if ever I see a young lady what deserved to be h'admired, it were that young lady at nineteen and a 'arf; an' if h'ever I can be of use to you, sir, as long as it ain't nothin' h'illegal, I'll be proud to 'elp you."

I observed his large hand stretched out as on the occasion of our first acquaintance, and I had the usual dealings with it. This time he so far acknowledged the transaction as to say that I might rely on him; though for what he did not state, his only further remark being that "'ot weather like this did make you thirsty, and it were a shyme that perlicemen couldn't go into pubs free an' open like h'other people."

So far as meeting Lucille went, my hopes were now vain. London had suddenly become to me a desolation. I was thrown back upon my own thoughts, and this was not a bad thing for me, because it drove me to some form of literary expression. Here was the second interest of my life.

It was fed by the very hopelessness of my passion

for Lucille. I think no man ever learns to write till he is in love: I'm sure, at all events, that he never writes so well. Love wrought in me an extraordinary quickening of imagination and emotion. I was stung into sensation, and this sensation communicated itself to my entire mind, making it a sensitive surface on which a multitude of impressions bit deep. I began to see life from an emotional standpoint. I looked with new eyes on London, seeing it no longer in the mass, as something grandly impressive, but in its separate elements. I became humanly interested in all sorts of people, the newsboy selling papers, the flower-girls in Piccadilly, workmen labouring on scaffolds high above the roaring streets, work-girls and their lovers in the Parks at night. I would follow this or that group, curious to know what they talked of, how they felt, what manner of lives they lived. A mother with a baby in her arms set me speculating on the eternal mystery of sex, the wonder of childhood and motherhood. A woman whirling past me in a hansom set my imagination working on a dozen themes; was she in haste to meet a lover, who brought her costly clothes, was she happy, what secret of joy or sorrow lay behind her smiling eyes and half-open eager lips? Foolish questions, no doubt, for which no replies could be found, but they filled my mind with the themes of endless drama. I asked in scorn how sated critics could make proclamation that all the great stories were already written, all dramatic themes exhausted? They were infinite as the light and darkness: they were like the seven primary colours or the musical octave, capable of infinite modulation, variety, combination. I remembered how Farthing had once claimed that there were dramatic possibilities even in Mrs. Trudge, and I saw now that he was right. Wherever human nature is, there is passion, poetry, drama—waiting for

an interpreter. So I felt and reasoned in these days, and because I had begun to see life with a true sympathy, for the first time I found I had something to write about and the power to write.

My Aunt kept her promise, and was my hard taskmaster. Each afternoon at half-past two I appeared punctually in the attic, and wrote steadily till six o'clock. My Aunt watched my toil with a grim complacency. She said little, asked no questions, and gave me no advice. She was content that I wrote, and she didn't appear to care how or what.

I thought this hard treatment at the time, but I soon came to see that there was wisdom in it. I had been accustomed in those fledgling Barton days to run at once to my parents when I had written anything, eager for the praise which I knew they would not deny. My Aunt also knew this quite well, and recognised the peril of it.

"I'm here when you really want me," she once said, "but don't think I'm here just to praise you, for I'm not. I don't want to see your failures, and you'll fail a hundred times before you begin to find out how to succeed. When you are sure you've written something really good, let me see it; but don't bother me till you have."

So I wrote and wrote, constantly destroying what I wrote. My pride was touched, and I was determined not to accept my Aunt's challenge till I was certain I could do so triumphantly. Sometimes I almost hated her for the complacency with which she viewed my toil. The more MSS. I destroyed the better she seemed to be pleased.

"It's not easy, is it?" she asked.

"No, it's not. It's deuced hard," I replied sullenly.

"Well, every high thing's a hard thing, isn't it?"

Certainly I found it so. I wondered what had be-

come of my old fluency. Words that had once rushed to me like a troop of friends were now hostile things that had to be pursued and captured. I came to my work with a mind hot with some impression which seemed so vivid and real that it could be recorded instantly: to my dismay I found, when I had written it down, it was but the palest caricature of what I had meant to say. The essence of the thing eluded me. I had shaken up the kaleidoscope of words, and had got not at all the combination I designed; often indeed a result so trumpery that I was heartily ashamed of it. It sometimes seemed as though it were a matter of mere luck. But in my heart I knew that it was not: I knew that there was a secret and a skill which could be found, and that I had to find it. So I struggled on, growing more desperate and humble every day, which was no doubt the best thing possible for me, for until we are thoroughly humble we lack the docility that learns from failure.

And there sat my Aunt, silent and watchful, and I believe sometimes amused. It needed all my real love for her to prevent me from throwing my mass of spoiled foolscap in her face, and rushing out to make friends with the first laughing Folly that might beckon.

And all the time the third interest of my life, which was my relation to Mr. Heron, agitated and distressed me. Since that night when I had spoken to him of Mr. Overberg, a change had passed over him. He often sat silent for hours, and his old enthusiasm for art seemed to have died. He looked older, and his eyes were more suspicious. More and more I wondered why the mention of Mr. Overberg's name had had so startling an effect on him. Of course I dared not question him, and he had never returned to the subject. But he had the air of a man who thought in

secret and a great deal of something that distressed him, of which he could not speak.

To me he was unfailingly kind and tolerant. He was a little jealous of my Aunt, and was uneasy if I were away from him longer than usual. His manners were softened, and with me, at least, there was little of his former brusqueness. Once I made bold to ask him if he was unwell. He seemed to resent the question so much that I never put it again. And so we went on pretending to each other that things were as they had always been; but in my heart I knew that they had changed, and went on wondering what had wrought the difference.

CHAPTER XIX

THE RETURN OF EDITH

THE fancy took me one night to renew my acquaintance with the Old Surrey Theatre and Mrs. Rhoades.

The August heat brooded over London. I was tired of the attic, tired of my Aunt's company, and, above all, tired of my work. Latterly I had begun to ask myself whether I should ever be a writer; and a yet more disabling question, whether it was worth while trying to be one? My youth cried out for gaiety, pleasure, adventure; all round me moved those great crowds of men and women intent on snatching some joyous hour out of their laborious days. Why should not I join them? Were not they wiser than I? Was not the old sad-hearted king right who said that there was nothing better for a man than to eat and drink, and enjoy the sunlight while he could, knowing how soon the great darkness fell? Youth comes but once, and here was I sacrificing mine to a task that seemed impossible; seeing the bright carnival pass by upon the flowing stream, while I laboured to climb heights that were inaccessible and barren.

Hope of success had not left me, however. Dimly visible to me at times was the goal I sought, the kind of thing I wished to write. It would be a play, a drama of London, the romance of the streets—something vital with the daily life and love of common folk. Romeo and Juliet should be seen again, but not against

the background of Verona—against the grimness of grey old London. There were times when I thrilled with the sense of some Power that used my mind and my imagination. Phrases leapt from my pen that filled me with delight. Then the Power failed me suddenly, and I dropped into an abyss of failure and despondence. The Power was an Ariel, a Puck—an erratic visitant; it came unsought, but was deaf to invocation. I envied at times the day-labourer at his task. For him there was an exact correspondence between means and ends. He knew what he wanted to do, and did it with a serene efficiency. My ends often mocked my means. If I succeeded it was by chance, if I failed it was by caprice. It was this perpetual uncertainty that wore me out, this torture of ideals that lay beyond my efficiency. And so, when the August heat lay like a shimmering veil of smoke over London, I was tired out, and was in the mood when I was willing to sell my pretence of birthright "with the thought-worn chieftains of the mind" for any mess of pottage that was rank and pleasant.

I found Mrs. Rhoades in her office, quite unchanged in appearance, but in a dejected frame of mind. The Man-Monkey had exhausted its popularity, and the good woman was in dire straits to discover any play that could succeed it. She brightened up at once on my entrance, believing I had come to negotiate another play, and almost relapsed into tears when I informed her such was not the case. She appeared to have a fixed conviction that the Old Surrey had reached its climax of triumph in that remarkable production, and would henceforth travel the downward path to failure and bankruptcy.

"Perhaps Far—I mean Fortescue could help you," I remarked.

"Fortescue," she answered with a melancholy shake

of the head, "'e's no good. 'E's borrowed money from me something shameful, always pretending 'e was working on a new play, but I've never seen a peep at it yet. I never did like 'im; 'twas you I liked."

This was flattering to my vanity, and I ventured to ask why she liked me and didn't like Farthing.

"Because you're a gentleman, and 'e isn't. I could always trust you, but I couldn't trust 'im. An' besides, it's my belief 'e's took to drink. The last time 'e was 'ere 'e acted very strange. 'E tried to kiss me."

"That shows his discrimination," I laughed.

"It shows 'is lack of it, I should say. I'm an old woman, an' it's no good pretendin' that I ain't. When a young man like 'im starts in kissin' an old woman, it's a sign he's in drink."

"Not always. Why I wouldn't mind kissing you myself."

"Go along with you," she exclaimed, with a kind of heavy skittishness. "I'm old enough to be your mother, and well you know it. Not that I'd say you nay, if you really wanted to, for you're a nice boy, an' I've always had a likin' for you."

Fortunately for me the situation was relieved at this moment by the entrance of Farthing himself.

He was better dressed than when I had last seen him, but nevertheless I was instantly conscious of a subtle deterioration in him. His face had an unwholesome pallor, and there were dark hollows under his eyes. He retained much of his old vivacity, but it now had less of the note of gaiety than of impudence. The effect was of a bright coin dulled, or of a picture over which some defiling substance had been smeared.

At first he did not seem particularly glad to see me, and Mrs. Rhoades did nothing to set either of us at our ease. She promptly reminded him of his debt to

her, and asked truculently when he expected to repay her.

"I'm working at a play," he replied, with something of his old air of light-hearted badinage. "Genius must not be hurried. We learn in meditation what we teach in drama. It'll be a great play when it's done."

"When it's done!" she repeated scornfully. "And pray when will that be? You remind me of the man who heard 'Enery Russell sing 'There's a good time comin'.' and asked 'im to be good enough to fix the date. I'm like 'im: I'm tired of promises, and want you to fix the date."

"Well, now B. P.'s turned up again, I wouldn't wonder if things began to materialise a little—that is if B. P.'s willing to lend a hand. Eh, lad?"

"I'll warrant you 'aven't written a line of it," she replied.

"No, but I'm turning it over in the place I call my mind," he said with a laugh.

"Well, see if you can't turn it over a little quicker, for I'm tired of waiting. You two may as well begin to talk it over at once, so I'll leave you."

She left the room, and left behind her an uncomfortable silence.

"Well, lad," he said at last, "things seem to have gone pretty well with you. I hear a rich man has taken you up. That's a chance I should like to have had. I've always had a fancy to get hold of a rich man and squeeze him. But by all accounts your rich man's a sort of lunatic, isn't he?"

"What makes you think that?"

"Why, didn't I call on you? And didn't an old madman rush at me with a broom?"

I remembered William's account of that Homeric struggle, and laughed at the recollection.

"He bashed your hat in with a broom, didn't he? Well, that was William's idea of duty. William is earnest but not always wise. Besides he believed you were drunk."

"Drunk at eleven o'clock in the morning? Now, B. P., does that sound likely? If it had been eleven at night, I wouldn't say."

"Mrs. Rhoades says you've been drinking more than is good for you lately."

"And what if I have, B. P.? I may have more cause than you imagine. However, that's neither here nor there. Some day you'll know."

"Know what?"

"O, I can't tell you here," he replied petulantly. "Let's get out of this, and lunch somewhere, and see if we can't be friends for the sake of old times."

We went to the Tabard and sat down in an old oak-beamed room to an excellent ordinary. During the meal Farthing recovered his spirits, and spoke with a gay scorn of the Man-Monkey and its success. It seemed the piece ceased to attract at last through the reprehensible conduct of the red-headed man, who resigned his part and was succeeded by an understudy who persisted in acting the Man-Monkey in such a gentlemanly fashion that the house would have none of him.

"The fellow did his murders like a pious laundry clerk checking washing bills," said Farthing. "He was the most polite monkey you ever saw, and was incapable of the requisite ferocity. The thing fizzled out one night when he burst into tears, and begged the audience not to throw potatoes at him, because they hurt—oranges he didn't mind, but potatoes made bruises, and besides he was doing his best. Mrs. Rhoades tried to go on for another week with another understudy, who played murder as though it were

farce, but it was no go. There never was but one real Man-Monkey, and he was the red-headed man. I believe he's now playing the part of a wicked curate in a piece called *The Mistakes of Marriage*, down at the Britannia in Hoxton."

After this thrilling recital, Farthing collapsed rapidly into gloom, which even whiskey did not disperse. He stared at me from time to time in a questioning apprehensive manner, until I became quite uneasy, and asked if he wasn't well.

"Who shall minister to a mind diseased?" he replied dramatically, "or pluck out a rooted sorrow from the brain?"

"Why, what's the matter?" I cried.

"I've made a fool of myself. A damned fool. No, I can't tell you. Come home with me, and you'll find out."

We rose and went out into the glaring streets, coming presently to a row of houses which had seen better days. We entered one, and went upstairs to a large room, with two tall windows facing the street. The room was empty. Across a chair beside the fireplace lay a woman's cloak, a gaudy affair of rose-coloured silk. On the mantel was a small silver hand-mirror, a box of cigars, and a framed portrait. I glanced round carelessly, and then my eyes were rivetted on the portrait. It was a portrait of Edith Hopper.

I looked at Farthing with interrogation in my eyes. His head drooped, and he said half-defiantly, "Yes, that's Edith. She lives with me."

I was too surprised to make any answer.

Farthing sat down at a table, with his head buried in his hands, and said in a low voice, "That's what I had to tell you."

"But I thought you hated her," I said at last.

"So I do, lad. I never hated her so much as I do now. Do you want to know the story?"

"If you wish to tell it."

"It's soon told," he said miserably. "A week after you went to Barton, Edith found me out at the theatre. She told me she was very miserable, and had left home for good. I suppose she played upon my pity. You know very well the way she had of getting round a man. A pressure of the hand, a kiss, and her arms were round my neck. Of course I believed it all genuine. I believed her when she whispered that she had always loved me, and I was flattered. I can honestly say that even then I did not want her. I reminded her of Lamson and his wish to marry her. 'I'd rather die,' she answered. 'I wasn't meant for that sort of life, and I couldn't endure it.' 'But I can't marry you,' I said bluntly. 'I don't want you to,' she answered. 'It's not marriage I want.' I knew then what it was she meant. She came home with me that night. She has been here ever since."

"Why not marry her then?" I said. "She surely must love you to have done what she has for you."

"My dear innocent," he replied, "don't you understand? Don't you know that there are some women who love love as long as it is free, and hate marriage on principle, because it is a bond? Edith is one of these women. Love me? Why she's not even faithful. She's no conception of what it means. She's a wanton. Even now, if I thought she could be true, I'd marry her, and try to make my life decent. But I know very well that it would never work. And I can't even leave her. I know that if I could evoke one manly thought, and act upon it, I should be free. But I can't do it. She's a parasite, and she's got her roots in my heart. When she kisses me my strength ebbs out of me. Every principle of manhood is dissolved.

I forget her baseness—I forget everything. I know I'm a lost man, and I don't care. But when I saw you to-day I began to care. I felt ashamed of my disgraceful weakness. But I know my compunction won't last. Edith has only to put her arms round my neck, and I shall capitulate. O, B. P., I think I am the most miserable man alive."

If I had not known Edith so intimately, and experienced her power of seduction; if I had not had the memory of that last night at the school, when she made it plain that she would have come to me without terms, the whole story would have been unintelligible to me. But if Edith's part in the story was intelligible, Farthing's was not. To hate and love at the same time; to see with the clearest apprehension a path as evil, yet pursue it; to admit shame yet make no attempt to overcome it; to be so completely at the mercy of the flesh that reason was dethroned and all sound judgment flouted—this appalled me. It was as though I saw beneath the bones and sinews of a living man a fibrous cancer steadily at work, a black octopus coiled round the heart and feeding on it. Was it true? And with the question wonder and horror fell upon my mind. Was I any better than my friend? Were all men fundamentally the same, plastic through their senses to any push of circumstance, any cunning hand that set nerve and blood vibrating? The thought shocked me like a defamation of our common manhood, and so I cried, "Farthing, I don't believe you. You are not as bad or as weak as you make yourself out to be. No man could be."

"That's because your own hour hasn't come," he said bitterly.

"But it's monstrous, it's incredible."

"Well, isn't human nature monstrous? Is there anything so base—and so beautiful? Isn't the same

man capable of the highest and the lowest actions? Don't I know? B. P., let me give you some advice. Let me alone. I'm done for. I've begun to sink into a black pit, and I shall go on sinking. You can't save me: no one can save me. Why, lad, didn't you hear what I said about Edith? She isn't even faithful, and I know it, yet I can't break with her. That's a shocking confession, but it's the truth. There's no hope for a man who accepts a degradation such as mine. If you'll take my advice you'll let me alone, and go your own way, and forget John Farthing."

"That I won't do," I replied.

"Then look out for yourself, that's all I've got to say. You can't touch pitch and not be defiled, you know. Only don't blame me; I've warned you."

He rose wearily, with a haggard face, and stood silent, gazing at Edith's portrait. Then, with a furious gesture, he flung it on the floor, and trampled on it.

"Weak rage," he said in bitter irony. "Edifying, isn't it? And it alters nothing."

And at that moment Edith entered.

If she felt surprise at seeing me, she did not show it. We might have parted on the best of terms and met upon a preconcerted plan. She blushed slightly, approached me with complete self-possession, and shook hands in the friendliest manner.

"So you've found us out?" she said. "Well, I thought you would."

Farthing stood watching her curiously. She noticed at once, the broken portrait on the floor, and said, "Why, what's this?"

"Only a little accident," he replied weakly, and began to pick up the broken glass.

"You two look as if you had been quarrelling," she said with a touch of gay malice. "My friends mustn't

quarrel. I've too few friends nowadays to be able to spare any."

"O no, we haven't quarrelled," said Farthing. "In fact we've just sworn a new allegiance, haven't we, B. P.?"

"Well, that's as it should be. It's quite a home-coming, isn't it? We must celebrate it with a little dinner. Farthing, suppose you go round to the restaurant and order something, and we'll have a gay old time."

"I must go," I said.

"Not till we've eaten together. If you go now I shall think you bear a grudge against me. And you don't do that, do you?"

"No, I bear no grudge," I answered.

"Then try to look cheerful. Now, Farthing, run along and arrange the dinner."

Farthing glanced at me significantly and went.

"Now make yourself comfortable while I take my things off," she said. "Here are cigars, and there's whiskey. Make yourself at home."

After the passionate scene with Farthing, this complete equipoise and coolness of Edith filled me with amazement. It seemed a thing unreal, incredible. I don't know what I had expected; probably hot blushes, awkward explanations, tears and protestations, at least some show of shame, or some dramatic moment matching Farthing's agonised confession. There was no sign of either. She took her position for granted, and expected me to do the same. And the singular thing was she was not acting a part. Farthing's face showed signs of the inner havoc of his soul: I had felt in the first moment when we met a shocked impression of some deteriorating change that had dulled and debased him. But Edith's face retained that Greuze-like innocence I had before remarked in it.

During the few moments I had been with her I had had time to get a clear impression of her: and not the harshest judgment could have construed any element in it to her discredit. She was dressed with taste and neatness; her eyes were candid as a child's; she looked so modest, happy, thoroughly at ease, that no one, seeing her, would have dared to associate an evil rumour with her. I could not but ask myself was she really not so much immoral as unmoral, a flower of the flesh with no spiritual roots, unaware of fatal deficiency, incapable of recognising what it meant.

Folding-doors separated the room where I sat from the room where she was dressing. She had left them partly open—was it purposely?—and I could hear her singing softly as she moved about. I was standing by the mantel. Over the mantel was a mirror which reflected a section of her room, and I could see her as she sat before her dressing-table. I could see the whiteness of her shoulders, and her arms; and the heavy masses of her copper-coloured hair. She was in that most adorable attitude of woman, her arms uplifted, fastening the coils of hair; and I knew that she was beautiful. And then, with a shock, I asked myself, was I too yielding to her sorcery—was this scene, so intimate and near, preconcerted? I put the thought from me angrily, and was ashamed that I could entertain it even for a moment.

Edith came back. She was dressed in some gauzy fabric of light green, which set off to perfection her hair and skin. She sat down beside me, quite unembarrassed, and took my hand in her old fondling way that I so well remembered. She moved closer to me, till I could feel the warmth of her arms and shoulders. It was all done with the unconsciousness of a warm-hearted child, of whom no one is brutish enough to suspect evil.

"You are going to be friends with me, aren't you?" she said. "I know I behaved rather badly the last time we met, but that's forgiven, isn't it?"

"I've nothing to forgive," I said coldly.

"And nothing to regret, eh?"

"Have you nothing?"

"Certainly not. I always meant to live my own life, and I'm doing it. We needn't talk of that."

"No, perhaps it's best not."

"Of course it is, you dear serious boy. Now don't frown, you know you're only a boy after all, and that's why I like you so much. I'm centuries older than you. I've had to think out a lot of things you've never so much as begun to perceive. I sometimes used to wonder what you would be like when you were a man, and I'm wondering still."

"I am a man," I said indignantly.

"You will be when you've woke up. But you've not woke up yet. Pygmalion and Galatea, you know—only you're a male Galatea."

She laughed merrily over the conceit.

"Well, I'm going to kiss the statue for old times' sake," she added. "Who knows but what it may awake?"

She kissed me with a mocking gaiety, and at once assumed the tone of casual conversation. She talked without bitterness of the days at the Academy—indeed she treated them as so far off that their very memory was faded. Lamson was struggling hard to win success. Her father and mother had left London, and she rarely communicated with them.

"We've quite separated," she said lightly.

"It's a bad thing to be separated from those who love you, Edith; a worse thing to be separated wilfully."

"O, that depends," she replied. "You see I always

felt myself a sort of changeling in our lovely household. I didn't truly belong there. Parents are a form of superstition, I think. They presume upon the fact that they've given you birth, and forget that you're just as much a separate person as themselves."

"What you call presumption, most people call love."

"Love"—and she uttered the word with a scornful laugh—"love indeed! There's little enough of love in most households. They rest on the prosaic basis of mutual convenience and advantage, and that's about all. B. P., let me tell you something. It's just because I saw what marriage meant to my mother that I determined I would have none of it. I saw her a mere slave, working harder for her daily bread than the poorest slut she employed, and without even the slut's wages too. She was as truly bought and sold as any African slave that went from the auction block to a lifetime of toil in the kitchen. You used to think I meant to marry Lamson, didn't you? I once thought it too, but I had just enough commonsense to see what such a life meant. What Lamson really wanted was a cheap slave, who would mend linen, keep accounts, run the house for him, look after the health and comfort of himself and his hateful boys, and count herself well paid by a share of his bed and board. 'No, thank you,' I said, 'I'm not made for such a life. Get a housekeeper, my good man, that's what you want. I prefer freedom with what you are pleased to call dishonour to such a life.'"

There was not only scorn in her words, but an indescribable levity, and a kind of pride too, as of a child who finds a joy in mischief. She spoke with sparkling eyes and gay laughter, as though she found a real delight in challenging the world's opinion. The spectacle was so new to me, and in some respects so shocking, that I was tongue-tied. Perhaps my silence

warned her of a growing hostility, for she instantly changed her manner, and became wooing and provocative.

"I suppose you won't want to see any more of me now, after what I've told you," she said with a drooping lip.

I knew very well that this was in truth my right course. A voice warned me that nothing good could come from association with her and that much peril might result. In my sudden access of pity for Farthing I had vowed not to leave him to his fate. I asked myself now whether I could really help him? And I knew that in helping him I might disable myself. Yet something sacred in old friendship struggled with my wisdom—another voice that spoke from no Delphian shrine of wisdom as I well knew, yet it thrilled me. A quick resolution formed within me, that I must do my best for Farthing, and if I risked something in doing it, why, after all, all life was risk.

"No, I don't wish to see no more of you," I answered.

"I hoped you would say that," she replied. Her hand once more stole into mine, with that old trick of twining fingers, and soft half-unconscious pressures, which brought back vividly to me the yew-arbour at Elm Tree House. "Shall I tell you why? It's because I'm really fond of you, you know. I always was."

Was she acting? I could not tell. Perhaps she did not quite know herself. But there seemed to be a real satisfaction and sincerity in her voice when she added, "So that's a pact between us. We'll be good friends, won't we?"

Farthing's step was on the stair. She rose quietly, smoothing her hair with rapid fingers, and met him with a smiling face.

CHAPTER XX

MIRAGE

WE sat down to our improvised meal in a spirit of cheerfulness which seemed strange under the circumstances. Farthing had always been an excellent companion, and whatever virtues Edith lacked she possessed a vivacity of mind which matched his, and a kind of perverted audacity which gave edge to the conversation. If misery sometimes looked out of Farthing's eyes, like a ghost-face at a window, it soon vanished, and it would appear that he regretted the confidences he had made to me, and wished me to forget them. The first shock of our new and strange relationship was over, and I think we were all silently intent on making the best of things as they were.

Neither on that night, nor on many subsequent nights when I was Farthing's guest, did anything occur to disturb the even current of our intercourse. If Farthing had been the most jealous man alive he could have found no fault with Edith's conduct. She had spoken of a pact between us; it was clear that what she meant by it was plain friendship, and she was careful not to exceed by a hair's breadth the spirit of the pact. She was always cordial, sometimes gay, but her old art of sexual provocation seemed wholly laid aside. I began to regard her with a sort of pity, remembering the causes of her revolt; and almost with respect when I saw with what skill she carried off a difficult situation. If she suspected the worst accusations Farthing had made against her,

and had deliberately set herself to prove them incredible, she could have found no surer means of asserting her innocence than by this behaviour. She accepted my friendship with gratitude; she was eager to win my regard and showed me that she valued it; and if, now and then, a warmer feeling than regard shone in her eyes, it was instantly suppressed.

The summer had passed: the languor of autumn lay upon the city, and upon my spirits, too. I have a theory that man's vitality ebbs with the year, and is renewed with the turn of Time: that, in fact, the exhaustion of the earth has its counterpart in the exhaustion of the human frame. I have sometimes wondered whether I was more susceptible than other men to these external influences, but to me they are very real. If I should ever lose my hold on life I think it will be when the summer is over and past, and all the world lies dying in a "death-dumb autumn-dripping mist." If ever I should be betrayed into some monstrous weakness, I can name the month of my dereliction; it will be October, for then the fires of resolution sink lowest in the breast. . . . And October had come with fogs and rain and grey skies, and a sense of infinite oppression.

October—and still I toiled at my task like a galley-slave at the oar; but it was in a sea enchanted, for no yard of progress could I make. Edith had said that I was not awake; but this did not apply to my mind, which was all too vividly awake to the nature of my task. For I had come to see that of all arts the literary art is the most difficult, and of all forms of excellence literary excellence is the least attainable. Hitherto I had been sustained by a cheerful vanity. It was on one of these grey October mornings I woke to find my vanity was dead. It had been pierced to the heart by the inexorable sword of the ideal.

Beside the bier where my vanity lay dead stood the spirit of scepticism, with a mouth full of mocking questions. "Literature," it cried, "is glamour, magic, native wizardry of words, and what sign have you that you possess it? Even if, after years of labour, you should find out how to express a single truth with supreme skill, is it worth the while?" There can be no more disabling question. Men may die cheerfully for aims in which they believe, but if they believe in neither the worth of the aim nor the efficacy of the struggle, what hope have they?

"Is it worth while?"

And at that question, in a rage of shame, I would burn my futile work, and rush out distracted into those crowded streets filled with men and women who knew nothing of my struggles, and, if they had, would have despised them.

I think my Aunt understood in part, and Mr. Heron might have understood had I confided in him, but I had become increasingly aware of another thing, that between age and youth an impassable barrier is fixed. They speak a different language, see things by a different perspective, test things by a diverse metric system. No doubt age is apt in counsel, but it is not counsel youth needs so much as impulse. I wanted a wind to fan the dying flame, some one young enough to believe in the impossible, who had not learned the dreary lessons of disillusion and experience.

Illusion—that was what I needed—a belief in mirage, some voice that declared it real, some voice foolish, reckless, inconsiderately brave, that challenged the tyranny of facts with gay scorn, and ridiculed their menace. Only by maintaining my illusions could I live: better a mirage that drew me forward than all the facts of life if they killed the nerve of cour-

age. And so I sought Farthing. Poor company enough, no doubt: but, disabled as he was, the reckless bravery of youth had not yet left him, nor the pillar of fire turned its dark side toward him.

I had talked of helping him, but I soon found myself looking to him for help. In that shabby room, in spite of shameful memories, youth dwelt, and there I found a refuge from my misery. There I could at least pour out my mind, and know myself understood. And, as for Farthing, I think this did almost as much for him as it did for me. He found again the old level he had left, and, for a time at least, forgot his catastrophe.

"Well, lad, what about the play?" was his usual greeting; and straightway he would fall to discussing intellectual ways and means with an ignorance which now seems to me pathetic, but which at the time was exhilarating. We fell into the old vociferous disputes about idealism and realism. His one idea was to paint life as it was, selecting nothing, omitting nothing, in which he was without knowing it the precursor of a vast tribe of dingy prophets who have since clothed the sordid with a sort of sacredness, and elevated ugliness into a cult. He was loud upon Bohemianism, by which he connoted a total disregard of decency, and an entire contempt for the Ten Commandments.

"You wouldn't have said that once," I retorted hotly, and then was sorry that I had said it, for he turned his head away in shame.

"I think that remark uncalled for," said Edith quietly.

"I think so, too," I said humbly. "Please forgive me."

"That's the worst of being good," she went on; "you never lose the chance of throwing stones at those who

are less good than yourself. I suppose that is the reason why good people have been hated so much."

"Have they?"

"Of course they have," she replied. "If good people would be good quietly, no one would interfere with them. But they won't do that—they want to flaunt their goodness before people who are not good, and then they get knocked down, and call themselves martyrs. O, you may be sure they didn't burn the martyrs for anything they believed, but because they wouldn't let other people believe differently. They were burned not as heretics, but as public nuisances."

We laughed at this sally, but it was some time before we felt quite at ease. I tried to help matters by saying that I had no desire to be a public nuisance.

"There's only one way of avoiding it," she said, "and that's by remembering that all people have their own opinions, and one opinion has as much right to exist as another. But there—why grow so serious? We're just three people trying to be happy, aren't we? I vote we pay attention to that, and so let's have some music."

She could play tolerably well, and had a voice of small range but good quality. Since she had come to London she had picked up a good many songs of the music-hall type, which she sang with spirit and vivacity. But the songs in which she most excelled were old-fashioned sentimental ditties, such as "She Wore a Wreath of Roses," and a song at that time very popular, "Once in the Dear Dead Days Beyond Recall." It was strange to hear the latter song upon her lips, for no one could have had less desire to recall the past, or have taken less pleasure in its memory. Nevertheless, she sang it with real feeling, and even pathos. Should a stranger have happened to come in at such a moment, he might easily have

imagined that he looked upon a scene of typical domestic happiness—the pleasant lamp-lit room, the bright fire, Edith at the piano, and Farthing and I listening to these songs of sentimental love and memory.

"Why do you sing that song?" I once asked her.

"An unattainable ideal, I suppose," she answered cynically.

And then, without warning, she would plunge into rag-time music, blatant and coarse, and sometimes would leave the piano to dance. If her vocal efforts never rose above mediocrity, her dancing was excellent. Some Spanish dancers had appeared about this time in one of the London Halls, and she had been fascinated by them. She had learned to imitate them with fidelity.

"Clap your hands," she would cry—"slowly at first, that's the way, then faster and faster, you can't go too fast for me."

And then she would pose herself with a black lace shawl over her head, and pin her dress up above her ankles, and wait for us to clap our hands. She would sway backward and forward, as if drawn and repelled by some invisible partner, throw herself back so that the lines of her body showed distinct as sculpture, turn her head from side to side with bewitching glances, and move her feet to the slow rhythm of our clapping, which sounded like the sharp clash of castanets and cymbals. I believe it is so that gypsies still dance in the Alhambra, and although I had never seen Granada, I was conscious of romantic backgrounds that rose silently behind her as she danced, visions of palms and mountains, and marble floors out of which rose slender pillars, and the singing of a tiny stream in marble runnels, and of fountains splashing in the moonlight.

"Quicker, quicker," she cried.

We increased the time, and there was something in those sharp detonations of sound that set our own nerves vibrating with a strange excitement. But she remained entirely cool, intent only on her art; her face flushed a little, her bosom panting slightly, but her perfect poise of body undisturbed. The charm of the whole thing was that it was more than rhythmic movement; it was the expression of emotion, gradually rising into tenseness, into a veritable rapture of abandonment. The unseen partner was obviously real to her; she feared and loved him, hated and desired, disdained and compelled; she was in turn slave and mistress, fury and lover; she was the living incarnation of a passion that knew the extremes of ecstasy and despair, and she passed from one to the other with the swiftness of a bird in flight. I caught a glimpse of Farthing's face; it was pale and tense, and I have no doubt mine was the same. The moment was hypnotic. Her feet in their rapid movements, beating on the floor, wrought in us a kind of trance. The walls of the room fell away: the grey actual swam in cataracts of sunlight; life opened like a vast fan at the touch of a magician: and when our clapping ceased, it was as though a splendid fabric fell with a crash, a dream had broken like a rocket into a million stars of fire, and left the world in darkness.

"How's that for dancing?" she cried; and this voice of common vanity hurt us like a blow. "Not bad for a beginner, eh?"

And then, as she re-arranged her dress, she told us that she knew she had found the one thing she could do well, and that she meant to do it.

"I shall go upon the stage as a dancer some day," she remarked. "I'm taking lessons, and you'll see me famous yet."

"What made you think of this, Edith?" I asked.

"The old garden at the Academy, I think. Do you remember the lawn, how green and smooth it was? Well, one night you said something when we were in the yew-arbour, looking at it. The moonlight was very clear that night, and you talked of the days when the cavalier women danced there, and I thought I saw them dancing an old-fashioned minuet. I wondered if I could do it, and the next day I tried. I persuaded father to let me take lessons, and I knew from the first moment that I had found the thing I loved. That's why I came to Lambeth."

She made this astounding statement with the most complete innocence. It did not appear to strike her that Farthing might not wish to hear of my adventures in the yew-arbour, or that she had told him a very different story of why she came to him.

"O, so that was the reason!" he said bitterly.

"O, well, one of them, you know—there were others. Now don't look grumpy—you know very well what I mean."

She crossed the room, and stood beside him, pushing her fingers through his hair.

He glanced at me significantly, and I knew what he meant. It was as though he said: "You see how weak I am. Didn't I tell you that however deceived I am, yet I can't break away?"

"There's nothing to be cross about," she went on calmly. "You have your ambitions and I have mine. If I have some other feelings as well, it doesn't follow that I've no ambition."

"Sometimes I wonder if you've any real feelings," he replied.

"O, lots of them, I assure you," she answered with a laugh. "You'd be surprised if you knew them all. I'm not sure I know them all myself. Some of them

I'm only just beginning to discover. And among them there is one that is very human—it's an appetite. I'm tired, and I want my supper."

We sat down to supper, and the difficult moment passed. After supper we sat amicably round the fire, and talked. The reference to the old garden had struck a chord of reminiscence, and Edith spoke more freely than I had ever heard her of her parents.

"There are some people who are born to failure," she said, "and my father is one of them. Poor man, he's tried hard enough to succeed, and has almost done so half-a-dozen times. But always something went wrong just at the critical moment. It makes one believe in a malicious Providence—some Power that plays tricks on us, and laughs at us."

"That's what the pagans believed, and the Kaffirs still believe it," I said.

"O, do they? Then they are much wiser than I thought them. They've certainly got lots of facts on their side: and the good people who are always trying to vindicate the ways of God with man have all the facts against them."

"That's a pretty hopeless philosophy, Edith."

"Is it? Well, I can't help that. All I know is that it appears true. If you'd seen my father's life at close quarters as I have, you'd agree with me."

"But what about yourself?"

"O, I'm not afraid of the Powers. I've taken my life in my own hands, and don't ask favours. I shall suffer and I shall enjoy, but at all events it will be my own doing. I'm not afraid, and where you fear nothing, nothing can hurt you very much."

She returned presently to her old contention that every one had a right to live life as he pleased.

"You talk as if it was my duty to have remained with my parents whatever happened. Well, I think

I have a recollection that both of you left them the moment it suited you to do so. You'll say you had no duty to them, and I had. But you had a duty, too, though it was not the same as mine. You went away to find your own lives, and I have done just the same. If I could have helped things by staying, I think I might have stayed. But I knew very well I couldn't really help—I should have been dragged down—I couldn't have lifted them up. Don't think I didn't suffer. I did. But I preferred a short sharp torture to a long disease—that is all. Some day, if I succeed as a dancer, I'll gladly help my father: and you'll admit that I'm far more likely to be able to help him this way than by any other. I'm not unfilial. I'm only sensible, and I take things as they are."

This hard worldly shrewdness, this clearness of judgment in one physically fashioned on such lines of softness, surprised and puzzled me. It was like the stone in a peach, upon which the tooth jars un-awares: a central hardness that is secret and indomitable. The strange thing was that it was so well concealed; that her Greuze-like innocence of aspect gave no hint of it. When she sang she seemed a child, full of simple romance and sentiment; when she danced she was the incarnation of all passionate love; and in each case the mood was real. She was not acting. She was following a genuine impulse of her nature. But her shrewdness and her selfishness were equally authentic. She might well claim that she was my senior by centuries; she was the lineal descendant of Lilith and Cleopatra. It came upon me in a flash of insight that she would always use men for her own ends as she was using Farthing; and that she would do it so skilfully that they would never know themselves the captured, but imagine to the last they were the capturers. If they found out the truth

it would only be because she chose to reveal it, and because she was sure enough of them to challenge their resentment. It was a strange metamorphosis from that girlish Edith who had sat with me so many nights in the old yew-arbour, and yet, as I looked back, I could see that all the latent forces that produced the change were in her then. The liberating touch had been her flight from home. In that hour these latent forces rose to the surface, crystallised, and took permanence of form. And yet her physical self remained unchanged—the beauty and the charm—that exquisite deception which entranced the eye, and lured the senses, and thrilled the heart with wonder and desire.

There were times when I resolved that I would see no more of her, and I knew the resolution wise; but I was driven back by a fascination that was stronger than my wisdom. If I had not been so tortured with the inefficiency of my work, if I had not been depressed with the miserable thought that Lucille was lost to me, I might have stayed away; but I was both lonely and depressed. There were other reasons, too; among them a strong curiosity to see how matters would shape themselves between herself and Farthing, and an almost pleasurable sense of peril. For in spite of all the outward rectitude of Edith's conduct toward me, I was conscious of a fire in her which slumbered, a suppressed intention toward me of which she could not wholly conceal the signs.

And then there was her dancing! Night after night the scene I have described was repeated, with growing art; and it became the one breath of romance that blew across my dull days. She spent all the mornings now at a dancing school, conducted by an Italian woman, whom she had persuaded to give her free instruction, with a view to a large percentage of her

profits when she should be fitted for the stage. From these arduous hours she came back full of joyous enthusiasm. She was incapable of weariness; she thrived upon her toils, and her form, always slight, seemed to become more vibrant and elastic, lighter of movement and more perfect in poise, day by day. It was plain that what had been to her a pastime in its beginnings had now become the serious business of life. She had struck on the idea of impersonations; with the aid of a few yards of bright gauze, and certain manipulations of her dress, she became a Greek dancer, a Spanish gypsy, an Italian contadina, and even a coster-girl in a Bank holiday saturnalia on Hampstead Heath. Farthing, with all his bitter thoughts about her, watched these performances with a glow of admiration, and to me they were amazing. I had never known before what was meant by the poetry of motion: I had regarded dancing as a sport for children; it had never occurred to me to rank it with the arts. As I watched Edith, I learned for the first time how expressive is the body, and how subtle is the appeal made to the senses by the grace of physical perfection. Here was a mind that repelled me, a character that I despised; but all moral values were forgotten in the contemplation of the body, in the glow and thrill that was communicated to the nerves by the mere grace of exquisite bodily harmony and movement.

One night when I went to Farthing's rooms, he was not there, and I found myself alone with Edith. To my enquiry where Farthing was, she replied contemptuously that I might easily guess if I remembered what his habits were.

"Is he drinking again?"

"Again?" she said scornfully. "Pray, when did he stop?"

"I thought you had reformed him," I replied.

"I've no vocation of that sort," she replied curtly.

"Perhaps I had better go out and find him," I said.

"Are you afraid to be alone with me?"

Thus challenged there was only one reply possible.

She sat down in the big armchair beside the window, and I could not but notice that she looked tired and spiritless. An old impression came back with vivid force—that night in the yew-arbour when she fell asleep, with the moonlight on her face; that night when my pity had been moved by the sense of her childlike frailty, the essential frailty and weakness of womanhood. And there were circumstances in the present hour that recalled that long-past hour. The fire was almost out in the grate. It had been one of those rare days of late October when summer had come back for a farewell visit. The windows were open, and a warm air blew through the room. The full moon had risen; it filled the room with a broad path of silver, and the lamp was not lit. The soft south wind, blowing from the hills of Surrey, brought a country fragrance with it, rare and sweet in this crowded field of streets.

"Did you ever see the *Midsummer Night's Dream* performed?" she asked me presently.

"No, I have seen very few plays. But I have read it. What makes you think of it now?"

"The moonlight, I suppose. It makes me think of forests bathed in silver, and meadows sparkling with the dew. London is horrible on a night like this. I want to bathe myself in moonlight like the trees."

She lifted her hands as if to splash them in the broad cataract of light that fell across the room, and sighed.

"Don't you ever feel that you're not really yourself at all—you don't truly belong here?" she asked.

"It's a queer thing to be known as Edith Hopper, and all the while to feel that you're quite another creature—perhaps Titania. All children love to play at being some one else; I used to do so as long ago as I can recollect. Did you, I wonder?"

"I used to imagine myself acting all sorts of parts, Indians chiefly, I believe, if that's what you mean."

"That's not what I mean at all. It's the sense that you are really some one else, that you've lived before in some other body. I always feel that when I dance. Would you like me to dance for you to-night?"

"You're tired. No, don't dance to-night."

"I'm never too tired to dance. And besides, I have a new fancy. I want to be Titania in a moonlit forest."

She rose quietly, and went through the folding-doors into her bedroom, saying as she went: "Play something soft and sweet on the piano—try Weber's *Invitation to the Dance*—the middle part; I think you know that."

I did as she wished, playing by ear that swinging rhythm which seems to have the thud of multitudes of dancing feet in it. The room grew stiller as I played. Through the open window I could hear the dying and dead leaves of an old plane-tree at the street-corner rustling as the breeze came and went. The languor of the hour, the silence, the intense brilliance of the moonlight, the haunting melody of Weber's music, had a strong emotional effect on me. I too began to dream of forests bathed with silver, of fields glittering in the dew, of fairy forms moving stealthily through the moon-dappled silences; and I could have wept to think how caged and mean my life was.

I was roused suddenly by a footstep, and turned to see Edith standing in the full beam of the moon.

She was dressed wholly in white, so that her form seemed part of the moonlight itself—it melted into it, and was interpenetrated by it. Her dress might have been gossamer, so diaphanous did it appear—filmy as a thin cloud that absorbs the light rather than conceals it. Her loosened hair fell upon her shoulders in a glittering mass, and as she commenced to dance it spread like a rising and falling halo round the pale intense face. And once more, with that instinctive art of hers, she had realised her thought. This was no creature of desire and jealousy: she moved with stately grace, and yet with gaiety; she was the queen of fairyland, detached from earth, yet of its very essence. She stopped as suddenly as she began; glided past me so close that her hair swept my cheek, and disappeared into her room.

A few minutes later she came back, clothed in her walking dress and hat, and said, "Did you like it?"

"It was wonderful," I answered.

"Well, then, since I've pleased you, I want you to please me. I want you to take me somewhere where there are real trees—I can't sleep till I've seen a forest."

"But, Edith—a forest in London—where am I to find it? And besides, it's late."

"There's Blackheath," she replied. "Let us go to Blackheath. There are trees there. It's only nine o'clock. We can get back by midnight."

Seeing me hesitate, she added: "Please. For old times' sake."

"Very well," I said. "The winter's coming. We shall never have another night like this."

"No, never another night like this," she repeated. "It would be a shame not to use it."

We went out into the Old Kent Road and caught a Greenwich tramcar. Even that dreary thorough-

fare was idealised by the moonlight; its dinginess was gone, and its grey houses became palaces of marble. At the foot of the hill we stopped, and climbed the steep road to Blackheath. A fresher breeze met us as we climbed, and at last the open land appeared, the wide common with its clustered trees, silent and lonely as a prairie. We took a narrow path to a gateway leading into Greenwich Park. The gate was closed, but a group of great oaks rose behind it, and cast a vast shadow round our feet. The worn turf beside the wall was dry and warm, and we sat down.

The silence drew its folds round us like a tent. We were so utterly alone at that hour and place that London was forgotten; it might have sunk with all its lights like a vast Armada, leaving the sea of Time desolate and empty.

Edith's hand stole into mine, as if seeking some protection, some assurance of comradeship in that depopulated place. Her face was averted from me, her eyes fixed on the vacant stretch of heath. She turned presently; her eyes sought mine in one long expectant glance. What was it she expected? Why had she brought me to this solitary spot? Was it mere whim or chance—was it something else, something designed and preconcerted?

She leaned against me like a tired child, and began to whisper softly in my ear.

"Don't let us go back," she said. "We've left London—left all the grime and misery—let it be forever. See how the white road runs yonder—let us follow it."

"The road to Lewisham," I said scornfully "—what good would that do us?"

"The road to Romance," she whispered. "The road so few ever see. But we see it. And we may never see it again. The white road that runs across

the world and beyond it—the road to Titania's forest."

Her face was close to mine now, her eyes gazed deep into mine, and drank my soul. All round us lay that world of silence—London indicated only by a dim glare of light along the walls of sky, and the white road that ran across the heath into infinity. The road of Romance, was it this indeed—the road of freedom and adventure, of miraculous and sweet happenings—the road that led into enchanted forests, where Youth dwelt, care-free and joyous, freed from duty and endeavour?

The magic of the hour thrilled me—the moonlight, the empty world, the love so clearly offered me.

Through the silence boomed a distant bell—the clock of Greenwich hospital striking eleven.

"It is late. We must go," I said.

"Not yet," she whispered. "I want to tell you something."

"What is it, Edith?"

"Something you might have guessed, but——"

She broke off with a sigh, that was more appealing than any words. In her eyes were tears; I could see them sparkling in the moonlight.

"It was always you," she whispered. "Not Lamson, not Farthing—it was you. I never meant to tell you, but I have."

The wind had fallen, and a dark cloud trailed across the moon. This sudden blackness, falling like a shroud around us, broke the spell. That white road of Romance, which a moment earlier had shone like silver, had now become a dark grey blur. A few drops of rain fell, and on the southward limits of the heath rose a wall of cloud, along whose moving summits and within whose depths the lightning ran. That swift electric fire burned through the folly

of my thoughts, and lit my heart with sudden revelation. Old pictures, old and sacred memories, rushed upon me—my mother's death-bed, my father's fine austerity of grief, their prayers and hopes for me; and above all the scene in Barton Church on that day when my mother was carried to her grave, and that vision of Lucille's face, outlined against the sculptured wall in a grace ineffable of purity and pity.

"Edith," I said, "there is a storm coming. It is unsafe beneath these trees. Let us go."

She rose silently, and we walked without a word across the heath toward the distant glare of London. It was midnight when we reached Lambeth. The storm which travelled with us broke in sheets of rain, and as we went up the street, the last leaves of the plane-tree at the corner were driven in our faces by the roaring wind.

CHAPTER XXI

REALITY

A NEW spirit had entered my life. It was not precisely the spirit of religion, but its effect was religious. It was as though the thunderstorm on that memorable night had cleared the air of my mind, washing it clean of defilement and infection. Technically I was not recusant from virtue; but in reality I knew that I was. I had followed too much the devices and desires of my own heart, and I was ashamed of my levity. My conduct was unsmirched, but I knew that my soul was not free of stain.

A remark which I happened to read at this time in one of Balzac's novels, laid hold of my mind with singular force. He complains of a moral miasma that haunts the dark and filthy passages of the theatre, and says that those who live long in such an atmosphere lose the sense of the "reality and solemnity of life." That was precisely my case. I had been playing at life till life itself had become a play. A strong revulsion had seized me; a disgust that was both physical and moral. In the expressive language of the greatest of all teachers, I came to myself; for, in truth, I had been out of myself, as we say of the insane that they are out of their minds.

"The reality and the solemnity of life"—and there was something more, the wholesomeness of life—this appealed to me. I knew that average human life was wholesome, and it was a sweet joy to me to find that my own soul was radically wholesome still. I

had no taste for evil. It may have been inherited instinct that prevented me; it may have been an innate fastidiousness; I am not at pains to define it, but something there was in me, native and fundamental, which made me more conscious of the coarseness of evil than its glamour. I had held this fastidiousness in abeyance; I had deliberately pushed it aside; but now it came back with a power multiplied in the degree of its repression. It was like the recoil of a spring into its accustomed groove.

I hasten this confession, because I wish to have done with it, and forget it. Life has taught me that a fastidious taste may often prove a greater source of strength than virtue or religion, because its sanctions are inherent, while the sanctions of virtue and religion are arbitrary. Hence I say that the new spirit which filled my soul was not religious, because it came from no outside force; yet it had the effect of religion, because it redeemed me from evil. In the critical hour of temptation it had restrained me by a conviction of the ugliness of evil, and the beauty of good—the only real beauty. And my soul clung now to this beauty in an agonised allegiance. To have swerved from it for a moment was a bitter shame. The recoil had now come, and it was complete. Never, never again would I be found in that lamplit room where Edith danced,—never again expose myself to the charm of Circe. Like still white peaks, long clouded, the reality and solemnity of life rose clear above me, and I fled the miasma of the plain, and ran toward them as Bunyan's pilgrim ran from the City of Destruction.

I felt a need of changed environment; London had become intolerable. A voice suggested Witmarsh to me, and I bought a railway guide to discover how it might be reached. It was represented on the map by

the tiniest dot, about a mile distant from a station on the South-Western railway. I told neither Mr. Heron nor my Aunt where I was going. Two days later I was in the train, and the smoke-cloud of London lay behind me.

It seemed as though the purgation of my soul began with the first vision of the open country. Here was a landscape quite unlike Barton—sunnier, wider, wilder; broad heaths, brown with faded heather, stretching into blue distances; clumps of firs, and the gleam of water in still ponds; sandy roads, flower-windowed cottages, small orchards,—a land that had a lyric note never found in the fat grazing meadows of the Midlands. A wind blew hard and pure across the firs, and the sky was silver-grey. A church tower rose here and there among the trees, a red-brick farmhouse, a red-brick barn with heavy buttresses, that might have been a refectory for some religious house, long since swept away, and perhaps forgotten. Sun-burned children swung upon the farm gates, gipsies were encamped on the edges of the heaths, and near Aldershot a file of soldiers moved along the road. Presently the country changed a little; green water-meadows lay between the chalk-hills, and when the train stood still the air was filled with the sound of running water. It was among these water-meadows I saw at last a long grey-stone building, deeply ambushed in hanging woods, and knew that it was Witmarsh. A few minutes later the train left me at an empty roadside station, and I started off along a high-banked country road to find the village.

Witmarsh consisted of one long straggling street, at one end of which the parish church stood amid its clustered graves, at the other a red-brick farmhouse, beyond which stretched the open country. The houses on this street were all old, low-eaved, oak-

beamed and plastered, with small bright windows, each with its tiny garden; and over the porches vines climbed or roses had been trained. There was no inn: the humblest of taverns served the needs of this remote community. Beyond the village, seen through a leafy wall of elms and beech trees, rose the grey front of the paper mill, like a citadel. A sound of bees and running water filled the air. The paper-mill, in its complete seclusion, subtly harmonised with the scene. No clank of engines could be heard, no jar of wheels; the effect was that of immemorial quiet.

At the tavern I found myself regarded with suspicion. It appeared that the village was a kind of feudal community of which the mill-manager was the grand seigneur. To have no business with the mill authorities was to expose one's self to very hurtful interpretations of one's motives in visiting Witmarsh. It seemed no one ever came there casually or for pleasure as I had done. The landlord of the tavern, who received me with alacrity on the supposition that I had some business with the mill, regarded me with instant coldness when he found this was not my object. While I drank my beer I was conscious of alert inspection by half-a-dozen curious eyes,—and when a keen-eyed quiet man, garbed as a workman, entered the room with a nod to the landlord, I was certain that word had been sent to the mill informing the authorities of my arrival.

"Witmarsh seems a very pleasant place," I said genially, with a view to improving my position.

"That is as may be," said the landlord curtly.

"It's surprising to find such a solitary country within such an easy reach of London," I remarked.

"There's a very good train leaves for London at eight o'clock," he said significantly.

"I am aware of it, but I don't see why you should

remind me of it. It sounds a little rude, if you will let me say so, landlord."

"It's a very good train—does it in a little over an hour and a 'arf," he replied stubbornly.

"No doubt of it—but you see, I don't mean to take it."

"Well, if you'll be advised by me, that's just what you will do, young man. We don't encourage strangers in Witmarsh, an' we don't want 'em."

The keen-eyed quiet man nodded approvingly at this. I was beginning to be a little angry, and was about to speak accordingly when the landlord ostentatiously turned a very broad back on me, and the quiet man came and sat down beside me.

"You mustn't mind Barnes," he said pleasantly. "He doesn't mean to be offensive. But we have to be very careful about strangers in Witmarsh, and Barnes is only doing his duty. Don't you think it would be a wise thing, under the circumstances, to tell him what your business is in Witmarsh?"

"I want to stay in Witmarsh for a few days' rest," I replied.

"But why Witmarsh? No one ever comes here for pleasure. There's nothing to do. The fishing is strictly preserved, and you can't get any for love or money."

"I don't want to fish. I want to rest. All I ask is a quiet room in this inn, and can you give me any good reason why I shouldn't have it?"

"An excellent reason," he replied with a smile. "There isn't one. This is not an inn, it's just a roadside pub."

"Well," I said, "I can tell you one thing. I'm not going back to London on the eight o'clock train as Mr. Barnes so considerably suggests. I've left London because I'm tired of it, I want country air, and

I like Witmarsh. I've no doubt you have your reasons for keeping Witmarsh secret, but I'm here, and since I'm here it can't do much harm if I stay a few days. You seem a sensible man, and if you like I'm sure you could recommend me to some decent lodgings. I might suggest that if you suspect me of bad intentions, you will have me under your eye in this way, which might be considered good policy from your point of view."

"I didn't say I suspected you," he said with a kind of bleak friendliness.

"But Mr. Barnes does, and for a guess I may hazard the remark that Mr. Barnes sent for you that you might look me over."

He laughed at this, and said, "Maybe you're right."

"Well, then," I replied, "if you are convinced that I'm entirely harmless, please do me a favour which I know you can if you like, and help me to find lodgings for the night."

"I don't know about that. You see no one here lets rooms. It's forbidden."

"By the proprietors of the mill?"

"By the proprietors of the mill. They own all the cottages, and letting rooms is forbidden. There's only one house where the law doesn't apply; it's outside the village about a mile. But something happened there before you were born, and no one has ever wanted to stop there since. The house belongs to a very old lady, and she mightn't wish to have you anyhow."

"We can but try. I shall be quite satisfied with a plain room and plain food."

"Did you hear me say something happened there—something that made people want to keep away from the house?"

"O, if it's a ghost-story, you needn't tell it me, for I don't believe in them."

"Well, it isn't exactly that. But if you don't want to know I don't want to tell you. All I have to say is that the old lady, Mrs. Withers, might care to take you in for a few days, for she's poor. And because I'm sorry for her I'd like to help her. But I don't believe you'll like it."

"I am willing to risk that, Mr.——"

"My name is Stanchion. Every one knows me here. If you want to make the experiment I'll go with you."

There was about the man a kind of dry cordiality which I liked. His face was thoughtful, and his speech much too correct for a workman. I put him down as some subordinate official in the mill, perhaps an overseer. Having once accepted my explanation of myself, he seemed desirous of removing any bad impression he might have made, and as we walked through the village he talked very sensibly of Witmarsh and its history. The paper mill had been there for a century, and among its workmen the same names appeared through three generations. It was a tradition that the son should succeed the father. The men were proud of their work and of the trust reposed in them, and not more than twice in a century had that trust been betrayed. He said this with a tremor in his voice: and here I found the secret of the man—the pride of honesty, sustained and incorruptible, the austere boast of a man of strictest conscience. As if ashamed that he had let himself say so much to a stranger, he at once turned the conversation to the natural features of Witmarsh.

"Some folk like the water-meadows and the trout streams," he said, "but I like the heath. The world seems so much bigger up there."

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He pointed to the broad ridge that rose above the village. We were walking up a deep-rutted sandy lane, at the end of which the heath rose and curved forward, like the crest of a wave. The clean pungent fragrance of the heather filled the air. As we reached the summit we came suddenly upon a long low white-washed house, with a garden stretching from its door to the fence. An old white-haired woman was busy in the garden. She rose at the sound of our voices, and looked startled.

"This is Mrs. Withers," said Stanchion. "Now you wait here, while I speak to her."

As I stood beside the garden gate, with the silence of the heath around me, a memory rose within me.

I recalled my father's story of his visit to Mr. Heron, and the white house nestling on the edge of the heath, at whose door stood the woman Heron loved. Was not this the very spot? It appeared to correspond at every point with my father's picture. The face and form of Millicent Smith rose before me like a dim wraith; I saw her tying back the roses at the porch, standing at the garden gate, eager for her lover's footstep, or looking out from the sun-flushed lattice windows with eyes of wistful love and waiting. And this startled white-haired woman—she must have been young then, and was it to her ears Millicent confided her hopes and fears? "Something happened before you were born"—I knew now what Stanchion meant; and I wondered if this old story of love and crime had hung like a shadow over the house ever since, and over this solitary white-haired woman, who was so plainly derelict.

Stanchion came back with the news that Mrs. Withers was willing to give me lodgings.

"You must not expect too much," he said. "She's old and frail, and has lived so much alone that she's

sometimes strange in her manner. But she's kind-hearted and will, no doubt, try to please you. If what you really want is rest, I don't know a quieter place than this."

And, indeed, none quieter could be imagined. There was no sound except the sough of the wind upon the heath, and the distant song of the trout-stream in the valley. Even so, I thought, the stream of Time ran, barely audible, past this solitary place, and the spirit of Eternity walked, sandalled with silence, beneath the moving heavens.

Mrs. Withers came forward and was introduced. I followed her through a plain brick-floored living room to a narrow staircase, at the top of which was a white-washed bedroom. The room smelt of lavender and sunshine, and everything in it was immaculate.

"This is your room," she said timidly.

"It is delightful," I replied, "and I am much obliged to you for letting me stay here."

From the foot of the stair Stanchion called good-bye.

"Come and see me," I answered. "You know you have to keep your eye on me."

"I shall come, no doubt," he replied, "but it won't be for that reason."

I heard his footsteps die away in the rutted lane, and the silence settled back like water into which a boy has thrown a stone.

The days that followed were among the most peaceful I have ever known. I wrote nothing, did nothing; but I was aware that things were happening to me, and that if I did not work I was being worked upon. The fine weather held day after day. A sea of silver mist filled the valley every night, vanishing with the full strength of the morning sun. The mist never

reached the heath: here the air was dry and pure. I slept each night with windows wide open, and the last sound I heard was the distant song of the river, muffled by the mist; I rose each morning with eagerness to meet the day. I was aware of a physical renewal, a silent reconstruction of my members; I was even more keenly conscious of spiritual regeneration. The stillness and vastness of the heath put new horizons round my soul. It stretched in brown billows into blue distances; man seemed dwarfed by its immensity, and all his hot passions and vain perturbations reduced to nothingness. Here was something strong, primeval, permanent, on which the busy passage of man had left no trace; and London itself, viewed from such a scene, became but the excrescence of a moment.

Mrs. Withers seemed to have been subdued by long contiguity with the heath into a silence like its own. She was the most noiseless person I have ever known; she spoke little, and in a low voice that barely rose above a whisper; she glided rather than walked, soft and unheard as the cloud-shadows that moved across the heather. When I spoke to her she was startled, as if long unused to the sound of a human voice. She put my meals on the table in silence, was uneasy in my presence, and was relieved when she quitted it. She spent all her time in the garden, and was reluctant to enter the house. There was something wild about her, the shyness of a bird that disdains domesticity. Only in the open air did she appear at ease.

I had brought no books with me, and there were no books in the house except the Bible in my bedroom. One night when sleep was slow to come, I rose, lit the candle, sat beside the open window, and began to read it. And here I made a discovery. Be-

tween the pages I found a faded slip of paper, which was evidently part of a letter written many years before. It began abruptly, and bore no signature. "I cannot and will not do what you wish," it read. "You have always mastered me, from the hour when I was a little girl, and now this must cease. I have done wrong to obey you so far, but, understand, I obey you no longer. Dear sister, think of me as dead. I am truly dead to you, and all the old life. Forget me. I ask this boon of you—it is the last I shall ever ask—let me be forgotten. O, if I could forget, as I now wish to be forgotten——"

Here the page was torn, and the rest of the letter had disappeared. It was a woman's letter—the fine sloped writing told me that—and instantly there rushed to my memory the name of Millicent Smith. I formed a picture of her, sitting in this very room, writing this letter in the anguish of her spirit—and then destroying it, believing that its appeal was vain. Who was this sister whom she feared? Did the pressure toward crime, of which my father hinted, come from her? It seemed unlikely that after all these years this faded letter could throw any fresh light upon her case, and yet some intuition warned me of its value. I put it in my pocket-book, thinking that if I did nothing else with it, I might show it to Mr. Heron.

Stanchion came to see me as he promised, and on the Sunday, which was his day of leisure, he accompanied me on a long walk across the heath. As we sat together in a little hollow warmed by the sun, eating our lunch, I asked him if he had ever been in London.

"I was there once," he answered, "but I was glad to get away. I thought it a mad sort of place."

"Why mad?" I asked.

"Every one seemed distracted," he replied with his grave smile. "They reminded me of caged animals beating against the bars. I wondered how they could live in such a place."

"And you sighed for the heath? I can understand that."

"I've always lived here," he said simply.

"Have you never found it lonely?"

"No, I can't say that I have. A place may be lonely if it has no associations, but no place is lonely if it has memories. My father and my grandfather walked here, as I am doing to-day. I've no doubt they did their courting here, and I sometimes think I can hear their footsteps in the heather. Then there are other memories—do you see that little round hill yonder? The early Britons fought there, and I've found many a flint arrow there when I was a boy. And do you see that broad white road? The Romans made it, I've been told; and folk say that on still nights you can hear the clash of steel as the soldiers march. I've never heard it, but I like to think that it is true. It makes me feel that Witmarsh belongs to the big world after all."

"Witmarsh has come before the world more than once since then, hasn't it? There was the Heron case, do you remember that?" I ventured.

"I was only a boy at the time, but of course I remember it. Why do you ask?"

"Well, you see, I know Mr. Heron."

He sprang up, and stood looking down on me with eager eyes.

"You know John Heron?" he said in a low voice.

"And love him," I replied.

"Tell me about him," he demanded.

"He's an old and solitary man. He has suffered much."

"Did he ever tell you about Witmarsh?"

"Never a word. He has not the least suspicion that I know his story."

"And was this why you came to Witmarsh—to find out things about Mr. Heron?"

"Upon my word, no. I came on the impulse, with no other thought than to get away from London. But when I saw Mrs. Withers the old story came back to me, and I've thought a good deal about it ever since."

My answer seemed to satisfy him, and he sat down again beside me. Presently he said, "Did those who told you about Mrs. Heron think well or ill of her?"

"They thought well," I answered. "They believed her innocent."

"I believe the same—we all believe it here," he replied with more emotion than he had yet shown.

He was silent a moment, and then began to talk in his usual quiet tones.

"I was a boy at the time, as I told you, and I carried Mr. Heron's bag to the station on the day he went away. He said something to me then which I never forgot. 'I don't think you'll ever see me again,' he said, 'but remember this, my boy, justice isn't always justice, but right is always right, and in the long run right is always done.' I was almost frightened by the way he said it: it seemed as though he was angry with me. I suppose he knew this, for he became quite kind in his manner, and gave me half-a-sovereign. 'That's too much,' I stammered. 'I can't take it, sir.' 'Well, you can give it back when I come again, but I've no other change with me now,' he said with a smile. The train came in just then, and he went away. But I've kept that half-sovereign, and I have it still. I've got to think that Mr. Heron will come back some day, and prove that right's right, and

I'd like to give him back his money, just to show I've not forgotten what he said."

"Do you know that's a fine thing to do, Mr. Stanchion?" I exclaimed.

"I never thought of it that way," he said simply. "All I thought was that it would please Mr. Heron if I did it, and besides that, whenever I look at the money, I am reminded of his words that though justice isn't always justice, right is always right. It's a good deal to be able to believe that: it keeps you peaceful, so to speak. I have my dark hours like other men, but there are two things that always help me; one is the heath with its great quietness, and the other is Mr. Heron's words."

He rose, and as we made our way back to the cottage, he slowly relapsed into his formal manners. Mrs. Withers was in her garden as usual, and the sight of her suggested an enquiry.

"Do you think she knows anything that might help Mr. Heron?" I asked.

"She knows a good deal," he replied, "but ever since the day when Mrs. Heron died her mind has been slightly unbalanced. She's all right as long as no one mentions the past; she's as sane as you or I in everything but that. I hope you haven't said anything to her."

"I did think of doing so," I replied, for I had more than once hoped to find occasion to show her the letter I had found in the Bible.

"Well, you mustn't do it," he said earnestly. "It would be too cruel a risk. But if you should ever find out anything that would help to clear Mrs. Heron, let me know. You may count me your friend, if you will."

"I am proud to do so, Mr. Stanchion."

He grasped my hand in silence, and went down the

hill. A few days later I left for London with the letter in my pocketbook. I felt that though it might be right to show Stanchion the letter some day, the first eyes that saw it must be Mr. Heron's.

CHAPTER XXII

THE BEWITCHMENT OF MR. HERON

My Aunt met me on my return with a smiling face.

"Well," she said, "I have news for you. The mouse has been able to help the lion."

"Which am I? The mouse or the lion?"

"The lion, of course, you foolish boy. But first sit down and drink your tea. You've plenty of time before going on to Mr. Heron's. He won't expect you before six."

Mrs. Trudge appeared as usual with the black teapot and a flow of mixed metaphor. My Aunt, in her pleasure at seeing me, seemed tolerant of the good woman's garrulity, and let her run on with a long speech, the theme of which was my improved personal appearance.

"'E do look well, that I will say," she remarked, "an', if I may be so bold, much improved, which is but natural, fresh air bein' the best medicine, not that folk aren't sick and die in the country too, but they die slower, so to speak, my mother bein' eighty-four when she died, and died most reluctant, 'er last words bein' 'I did 'ope to 'ave eat them green peas,' she bein' partickler fond of green peas. 'Tis my opinion folk don't want to die as long as they 'ave somethink to love, even though 'tis only green peas, which I wouldn't wonder if Mr. Robert was in love, which is the 'abit of young men, specially when they go into the country with nothing else to do, and it bein' well known that country gels expect it of them, most of

'em bein' of the yielding sort, which I see the signs of love, if ever I see them anywheres, in Mr. Robert's eyes, me knowin' the signs; an' this I will say, if I never says another word, that lucky is the gel that sees that there love-light in Mr. Robert's eyes, an' knows she put it there——"

"That will do," interrupted my Aunt.

"Which I could kiss 'im myself," Mrs. Trudge continued in a final outburst of emotion, "me bein' old enough to be 'is mother, and no 'arm in it; evil thoughts bein' to them as evil thinks 'em, as the sayin' is, an' I'm sure I've tried to be a mother to 'im, in the days before you came, ma'am, a-darnin' of 'is pore socks which God knows wasn't worth the mendin' and likewise 'is shirts which was worse, pore boy."

With this hurtful reflection on my wardrobe Mrs. Trudge gambolled off, or ambled off, or trundled off—I really don't know which verb best describes her motions, which were that of a heavy body endowed with a power of sudden levitation—as though, for example, the podgy statue of Queen Anne in front of St. Paul's Cathedral took to dancing, and became a Taglioni with bags of flour for feet.

"And now for your great news, Aunt," I said.

"The news is I've read your play."

"But it wasn't finished."

"It was finished enough for me to find out what it was worth."

"Well, what did you think of it?"

"It wasn't nearly as bad as might have been expected," she replied with her most judicial air.

"I suppose you expected it to be pretty bad then."

"Of course I did, child. I knew very well that you didn't know the first thing about the construction of a play. But I didn't interfere, because I also knew that ideas count for more than construction, and I

believed you had ideas. You thought me very hard and indifferent, didn't you, when I saw you writing day after day and never said a word? Of course you did, and I've not the least doubt you hated me for it. Well, when you had gone, I began to go over your papers, and I saw what it was you were trying to write. And at this point I'm going to make a confession—I *did* something for which you've a right to be angry with me, I took liberties with your play, and altered it to please myself. You must remember I am an old hand. I couldn't write a play to save my life, but I do know what makes a play go and what doesn't. I used to edit Shanley's plays—mostly with a blue pencil. I've done the same with yours, my dear."

"Let me see what you've done, Aunt."

"I'm afraid I can't do that."

"Why not? Have you destroyed my play?"

"Well, it isn't here," she said quizzically.

"Then where is it?"

"You had better ask Henry Irving."

I sprang from my seat, and cried, "What did you say? I—I don't understand."

She rose also, and her arms were about my neck.

"I showed it to Irving, and I believe he's going to take it, my dear."

I think it must have been a full minute before this amazing news penetrated my mind. When it did so my excitement was uncontrollable. I danced round the room with my arms round my Aunt's waist, much as Farthing had once danced with Mrs. Trudge. In my sober senses I would as soon have thought of dancing with my Aunt as with the Monument or Cleopatra's Needle. Yet, though her wig was awry, and her breath came in gasps, I believe she liked it, for her eyes were alive with pleasure, and her grenadier stiffness became suppleness in my hands.

"There, that will do," she panted, between tears and laughter; for she had become suddenly aware of the shocked face of Mrs. Trudge in the doorway.

"Sich goin's on under my roof I never see," came the accusing voice from the doorway. "But 'tis what I allers feared, a-workin' 'is pore brain night an' day, which I told 'im led to Bedlam, an' it's come. I do 'ope 'e 'avn't hurted you, ma'am, which is more than can be expected at your age, bein' dragged about like that by a young madman, which it do grieve me for to say it, but sich 'e is, an' there's nothin' for it but the perlice, sick an' sorry as I am to 'ave 'im took away."

"Not mad, most noble Festus," I shouted gleefully: but Mrs. Trudge, on whose mind Biblical allusions were lost, began to sob violently, and to exclaim, "An' now 'e do call me Festus, which I am not——"

"You certainly are not: you're Mrs. Trudge, and if I remember rightly you keep some excellent bottled beer in your cellar, and——"

"Then you're not mad?" she blubbered.

"Only afflicted. It's a curious affliction which comes at rare intervals——"

"Like St. Vitin' Dance, I suppose——"

"That's about it," I replied. "And there's no known remedy but bottled beer, administered without delay, and in considerable quantities."

When the excitement was over, and the remedy for "St. Vitin' Dance" had had its due effect, and my Aunt, still somewhat dishevelled, had regained her composure, she told me the whole story.

She had altered my play, very much, as she had said, by use of a blue pencil, and by the addition of the stage-craft which it lacked. It seemed she had a position of respect in the theatric world which I had not estimated, and had kept in touch with many old

friends, among whom was the famous actor-manager of the Lyceum, whom she had known in the days of his early struggles. To him she had taken my play: had read it to him, and aroused his interest in it; and he was disposed to produce it at the earliest opportunity.

She did not tell me what I only learned years later, after her death, that she had backed up her belief in my play by the offer of financial assistance in its production. What she now appeared most anxious to impress upon my mind was that her good offices had been of really nominal value, that it was the merit of the play itself that had won Irving's recognition and regard.

"No, Aunt, that won't do," I said. "Didn't you tell me that it wasn't nearly as bad as might have been expected? That was your phrase, I think."

"Well, I didn't want to flatter you, that's all. And besides nobody in his senses could have expected a really good play from a beginner like you. I'll admit now that when I began to read your play my expectations were small. I was genuinely astonished at what I found."

"I know one thing," I cried. "I know whom I have to thank if my play is good, and the only fair thing is to have your name upon it beside my own."

"I'm too old for that, my dear," she said with a sigh. "Once was the time when I should have jumped out of my skin for joy at the chance of my name on a Lyceum play-bill. But when we get old we learn to live through other people whom we love. If I can live through you, I'm satisfied. Thank you all the same for the thought, the kind and generous thought. If my dear boy will always think of me like that he will make my old age very happy."

That was the utmost expression of emotion I had ever witnessed in my Aunt. I was sure, by the trembling in her voice, that she found it difficult to say so much; and I almost expected her to drop her steel vizor of reticence with a clang and utter the old formula, "Let us have no Shanleying."

My feet trod the air as I left Lambeth an hour later and took my way to Callipash Street. As a boy, when my spirits ran high, I had often had the delightful sensation of leaping vast distances in scorn of gravitation, of jumping off high cliffs with perfect ease, of flying like a bird—most boys can recall these experiences, and have dreamed that their feet had wings—it was precisely so that I felt now. The London pavements were resilient beneath my feet; I leaped and bounded, a very Pegasus, and was surprised to find myself racing the busses, and otherwise behaving in a manner which would have justified Mrs. Trudge's worst suspicions of my sanity. I had written a play which Irving had liked! The gates of fortune, against which I had so long vainly clamoured, had opened to me silently. I wanted to shout the news aloud. It seemed to me an outrage that London didn't know it: that it remained imperturbable before a fact so miraculous. If these dull crowds had but listened they would have heard the air all a-whisper with the news; if they had looked up they might have seen it written on the clouds. And here were the newsboys shouting trumpery information about squabbles on the Indian frontier, and sporting prospects, and the failure of a Scotch Bank—and not one of them knew that I had written a play which Irving had approved!

My spirits were instantly subdued when I reached Callipash Street by the gloomy countenance of William. He came to the door on tiptoe, his finger on

his lips, and the most melancholy expression on his countenance.

"Why, William," I cried, "what's the matter? You look as if you had seen a ghost."

"Worse nor that," he replied; "I've seed a villin."

"A what, William?"

"A villin. A dark scoundrel, or my name ain't Willyum. I know'd him directly my old eyes seed him, an' I said, a villin you is, for the Lord 'ave wrote it on your face, like he wrote murder on Cain's. An' ever since that day the master 'ave been ill, and now e's took to 'is bed."

"Do you mean that Mr. Heron is ill?"

"Well, 'e 'ave been a-bed this three days, an' if that ain't being ill, I'd like to know what is, Mr. Robert; 'e ain't eat nothin', and 'e don't do nothin'—'e do jest lie there thinkin', and thinkin', an' even 'is books don't interest him. It do seem to me 'e've had some kind of shock, an' his mind is 'urted. 'Tis my belief 'e's bewitched."

"Bewitched? Why, what on earth do you mean?"

"O you don't understand, of course, bein' nothin' more than a young whipper-snapper, and not 'avin' lived in the solitary places of the airth like I 'ave. But I've seed it often. I've seed a 'orse all a-tremble in 'is stable, with fear in 'is eyes, when there wasn't nothin' to be seen that frightened 'im, an' the country folk know'd that the witches 'ad been ridin' of 'im in the night. I'm an ancient man, an' I've seed things in my time, I 'ave. Things like the holy prophet Job seed, when 'e said the 'air of his flesh stood up, an' likewise the wicked Saul when 'e let the witch of Endor play tricks upon his soul. An' I tell you, solemn, as if it was my last word, there's a look in the master's eyes jest like the look in the eyes of a 'orse which 'as been ridden in the night by witches."

I felt inclined to laugh at William's superstition, but there was something in the earnestness of the old man that both restrained and alarmed me.

"I'm glad you've come," he said, in a faltering voice; "it's main lonely for an old man like me in this 'ouse, an' somehow I'm a-feared."

Nothing could be more eloquent of some extraordinary happening in my absence than this new attitude of William's toward me. He who had always resented my presence now showed signs of clinging to me as a source of strength and comfort.

"I'll fight anything I can see, Mr. Robert," he said with great solemnity, "but I'm a-feared of what I can't see. There's somethin' goin' on 'ere I don't understand."

"Well, cheer up, William," I replied with a confidence I did not feel; "no doubt the explanation of it all is very simple, and at all events we'll try to find it."

"Yes, we can but try," said the old man, with tears rolling down his face; "but you mark my words, the master is bewitched."

Of course this was nonsense, though I did not say so to him; but there was one part of his statement that was intelligible. He had spoken of some dark scoundrel who had evidently come to the house during my absence, and of Mr. Heron's trouble as dating from that visit.

"William," I said, "you declared you had looked on a villain; what did you mean by that?"

"I mean 'e were a man with Cain written on his face by the finger of the Lord."

"But who was he? What did he look like?"

"'E were a big dark man, all dressed in black."

"What did he want?"

"'E wanted to see the master."

"And did he see him?"

"'E were shut up with 'im for nigh a hour. I went into the room once, but the master waved to me to go out. An' I listened at the keyhole, I did; but they talked so low I couldn't 'ear nought. It were after the dark man 'ad went away that the master was taken ill."

"But didn't he give you a name when you let him in?"

"'E may 'ave done, but my 'earin' ain't what it was, an' I didn't catch it rightly. Only this, I says, an' this I sticks to, 'e were a villin, if ever I see one, and 'is name like enough were Beelzebub."

It was evident that no further light was to be obtained from William. I went to my room with misgiving. The silence of the house made me nervous and depressed. For my own part I had little doubt who the mysterious visitor was. I remembered Mr. Heron's behaviour when I had casually mentioned the name of Mr. Overberg, and I was certain the "big dark man, all dressed in black," who had excited such fear in William, was none other than the Barton banker. But after all that told me nothing. Supposing Mr. Overberg had called, what was there to explain his malevolent influence on Mr. Heron? The only thing I could think of was that some of Mr. Heron's investments had gone wrong, and that Overberg was the bearer of evil tidings. But while I knew relatively little of my patron's financial affairs, one thing I did know, that he had no investments that were in any way connected with Mr. Overberg. Besides I was too thoroughly aware of the fundamental stoicism of Mr. Heron's character to believe that financial reverses could have shaken him to the degree that William indicated. Whatever the clue was, it lay deeper than that; of this I was certain.

I dined alone that night, and it was not till next morning that Mr. Heron sent for me.

I found him sitting beside the window in his bedroom, clad in an old dressing-gown, with a table beside him, covered with books and papers. He received me with gruff cordiality, but I could see that he was much altered. His beard had become quite grey, his eyes were sunken, and his hands were restless. He made a pretence of tying and untying some of the packets of papers on the table, looking up at me as he did so with furtive eyes.

"I'm sorry to find you've been ill," I said.

"Ah, William told you that, I suppose. Well, you mustn't take all William says for Gospel. I've been a little so-so, but not ill. Never mind me: tell me about yourself, my boy."

I have no doubt it was selfish of me, but the big news about my play, which had lain secret in my own bosom all night, leaped instinctively to my lips.

"I've finished my play, and I believe it is going to be accepted at the Lyceum," I cried, with an irresistible tremor of pride in my voice.

"That's news indeed," he said, "and I'm very glad to hear it."

He was quiet a moment, and then added, "Because that simplifies matters, you know."

"In what way, sir?"

"Well, it is a little hard to say, but I may as well tell you at once, and get it over. I've always felt that you were wasting your time here, but I was selfish enough to want to keep you here as long as possible, because I am a lonely man, and I loved to have you with me. But now that you've found your career, I can't expect you to stay with me any longer. And, indeed, there are grave reasons, very grave reasons, why you should not. It has worried me a good deal

to have to say this to you, but now that you have your play accepted, I can say this in the conviction that your good sense will already have suggested that you ought to leave me."

"I should be a selfish hound if I had any such thought, and I assure you no such thought was in my mind. I ask nothing better than to stay with you, as long as I can be of use to you."

"Well, well, Robert, I rather hoped you would say something like that. It does me good to hear you say it, and I shall not forget it. But all the same there are reasons why we should part, grave reasons, as I have said. It is not unlikely that I may have to change my mode of life——"

"Mr. Heron," I interrupted, "you've shown me a kindness very few men would have done. If your mode of life is to be changed that is all the more reason why I should not leave you. I'm quite sure William wouldn't leave you whatever happened, and why should you think me less capable of fidelity than William?"

"I don't, I don't, my dear boy. But William's different. He's an old man and you are a young man. He's the ivy on an old wall, but you're the young tree that must have it's own soil, and room to expand. Take my advice—I won't put it more strongly, and it's kindly meant—it's your wisdom to go."

"I won't go, unless you force me to."

"You're a curious kind of secretary, aren't you?" he said with a gleam of his old humour. "I dismiss you, and you won't go. Doesn't that strike you as rather unusual?"

"It would be, if I'd ever been a real secretary. But I rather think you've treated me more as a son than a secretary; and unless you want to forget that

you've been like a father to me, I don't want to forget that I've been like a son to you."

The old man rose from his chair, and came toward me with outstretched arms. He gripped my hands hard, and there were tears in his eyes.

"Very well, Robert," he said, "it shall be as you wish. And, to tell you the truth, it's what I wish too. I'm not an emotional person, as you know, and you mustn't expect from me the sort of speech you would put into a play. But from my heart I say, God bless you, my boy."

He sat down again, and said presently, "Well, now tell me about yourself. It's very stupid of me not to have pressed that question before. Instead of that I've been thinking only of my own affairs."

"It's of your affairs I've been thinking too," I replied. "William gave me a highly decorated narrative last night of a mysterious visitor, dressed in black, who he thought was Beelzebub, and William further stated that he believed you were bewitched."

"Yes, I've had a visitor, and it was some one you know. It was Mr. Overberg of Barton."

"I thought as much."

"Why?"

"Because when I once mentioned his name to you, I saw you were much upset."

"Yes, I remember. Well, I can't tell you all about Mr. Overberg now—it's an old story and a long one. I'm a good deal shaken in body, and I don't care to speak of a matter which is profoundly distressing. Some day, if it seems right that you should know the story, I will tell you. This is a rather happy hour for each of us, isn't it? Don't let us spoil it. My affairs can wait. But tell me about your own. Where have you been since you left me?"

"I've been to Witmarsh."

The effect of this statement was astounding. Mr. Heron rose, his whole frame stiffened, and his face became pale as death.

"Witmarsh, Witmarsh," he stammered; "what took you there?"

"The merest fancy. I once heard my father mention the name, and I thought I would like to see the place."

"Robert," he said sternly, "I think you are not telling me the whole truth."

It was my turn to stammer, and I blushed furiously.

"I am not," I said humbly.

"What more did your father tell you? Answer me fully."

"He told me of an event—an event—that happened there a long time ago—of a visit he once made——"

"And you've known all this ever since you've been with me, eh? And no doubt watched me curiously? Perhaps put me in your play? I wouldn't wonder. I've long noticed that persons who call themselves literary artists are destitute of both decency and conscience."

"Mr. Heron," I cried, "now you are unjust. My father told me something which he never meant me to tell you. I have never so much as named it to a living soul. If I had dared to mention it to you, you would have justly accused me of impertinence."

"That's true, too. I admit so much. But can't you see that it's excessively painful for me to think that all these months you've lived under my roof, and known my secrets? Doesn't it suggest spying? And then you go to Witmarsh, and I suppose you never would have told me that if I had not happened to ask you. Robert, there's something devious about your character, and I don't like it. You're too subtle and secretive ever to be a good secretary. I think we had

better forget the effusive speeches of a few moments ago. We must part."

The injustice of this speech stung me.

"I'm perfectly ready to go, and go at once," I replied. "I am conscious of no wrong. And even your injustice shall not make me forget all I owe to you."

I flung out of the room in a heat of passion, and went to my own room, and began to pack my bag. In about an hour everything was done. As I was putting my last papers away, I remembered the letter I had found in the Bible at Mrs. Withers'.

"He ought to have that," I thought. "It certainly doesn't belong to me."

I went back to Mr. Heron's room. He was sitting at the window, with his back turned to me, and did not look up as I entered.

"Mr. Heron," I said, "I am ready to go, and I wish to say good-bye."

He made no movement.

"I want to assure you again that when I went to Witmarsh it was by pure chance. Chance played me some other tricks at Witmarsh. I stayed in the house of Mrs. Withers, because there was no other place where I could have stayed. I was taken there by a man called Stanchion. One night I found part of an old letter in a Bible in my bedroom. I always meant to give it to you, for it seemed to me right that you should have it. Here it is."

I laid the letter down on the table, and left the room with a very heavy heart. Mr. Heron had not so much as turned his head, or said a word to me. I thought, if he could be proud, so could I; and I left the room in silence, and went downstairs with a very stiff back.

I delayed a few moments in the hall to take farewell of William, and was listening with impatience to some new evidence he had found of the bewitch-

ment of Mr. Heron, when I heard a tremendous banging of doors upstairs, and a sound of furniture overturned, and the voice of Mr. Heron shouting, "Stop him, William, stop him, I say."

"'E've gone mad, sure enough," said William in a trembling voice. "Do 'ee just hearken to that—a-shoutin' an' a-bawlin', like as tho' Beelzebub had got him——"

But William's tearful ejaculations were interrupted by the sudden appearance of his master. Mr. Heron came downstairs with the violence of a volcanic eruption. He was literally projected against me, and for the moment I believed with the astonished William that he was insane.

"Come back, my boy, come back," he cried. "I'm an old fool. Forgive me."

"Why, what's the matter?" I gasped.

"The letter, my boy, the letter. Chance has played another trick—it's unbelievable. And I was going to drive you out, God forgive me for an old fool, a drivelling senseless idiot——"

"Then you don't want me to go, sir?"

"I implore you not to go. There, will that convince you? An old man is begging you to forgive him. And if you do, please don't say *sir* to me any more—it hurts."

"I never wanted to go," I said; and there was such relief to my angry heart in that statement, that the hot tears stood in my eyes.

"And you never shall. William, take that bag upstairs. And William, let me see—haven't we some champagne somewhere? Open a bottle at once."

"Mr. Heron, you know very well that there champagne is pernicious to you. 'Tis strictly forbidden by doctor's orders."

"Nothing can hurt me to-day, William. Doctors

be blowed. I've done with 'em. I believe I've become young again."

"You're sure you ain't bewitched?" said William anxiously.

"Bewitched with happiness, William. That's a bewitchment most people covet, but few find. I think I've found it."

He stood there, an odd figure enough, his face glowing, his arms waving frantically in his scarecrow dressing gown.

His voice sank suddenly to an awed whisper.

"I called it chance," he said solemnly. "I was wrong. It was God."

CHAPTER XXIII

MR. HERON'S STORY

THE revulsion of feeling was so intense that neither Mr. Heron nor myself were quite masters of ourselves during that extraordinary lunch. Even the melancholy William caught the infection of mirth, and skipped about the room in the most youthful fashion. Mr. Heron asked many eager questions about my play, which led William to volunteer the information that he had once been a player himself, and had acted with the mummers in the tragic "dramar of St. George and the Dragon."

"When and where was that, William?" asked Mr. Heron.

"It were in 'Ampshire," he replied. "Every Christmas we did slay the dragon. I were a reg'lar man of war in those days, I was, like the holy David, and I slewed my thousands, so to speak. I was well knowed to be a man of valour, though I be as lean as a 'urdle to-day. Nevertheless I b'aint done yet, an' I be a dreadful man when I be roused."

"So you are," said Mr. Heron. "We all know it, William."

"And there's those I'd like to slay too," said William darkly. "'Im with the mark of Cain on 'is forehead is one on 'em."

"Who's that?" said Mr. Heron.

"I think he means Mr. Overberg," I replied.

"Yes, that's 'im," said William. "'Is name do come

back to me. I know'd there was a O in it, but I disremembered the other letters. But I know'd 'im for a son of Belial so soon as my old eyes rested on 'im, and if he do come 'ere again, I'll have 'is bleed."

"Steady, William," laughed Mr. Heron. "I may want to have his bleed myself."

"In that case," said the old man with profound gravity, "I'll leave 'im to you, Mr. Heron."

"And now," said Mr. Heron, when William had gone, "I've some questions to ask you, and some explanations to make. First of all, tell me about Witmarsh."

I related the details of my visit, to which he listened with deep attention, interrupting me from time to time with questions about the place and the people.

"You're right in liking Stanchion," he said. "He's well named. The Stanchions, father and sons, have all been alike—steady men, proud of their honesty, and faithful to the trust reposed in them. He's intelligent, too, I have no doubt, highly intelligent, if he's like his father and grandfather."

"That's how he struck me. The only thing I didn't understand about him was that he dressed as a workman, but obviously was much superior to the ordinary workman."

"That's the Stanchion pride," said Mr. Heron. "Most workmen nowadays would wish to conceal the fact that they were workmen; but the Stanchions count it an honour. Besides, you must remember their work calls for unusual skill, and is something to be proud of. If Stanchion were made manager of the mill to-morrow, I've no doubt he'd still stick to his workman's dress. He regards it as a soldier regards his uniform. But go on. What about Mrs. Withers?"

"She is old and frail, very quiet, very shy and frightened in her manner."

"Poor woman," said Mr. Heron; "she may well be. And yet when I knew her she was——"

He stopped and sighed deeply. I was conscious that his memory was busy with scenes that were acutely painful, and said, "But why talk of these things?"

"The time has come when I must talk of them, my boy. I have been a silent man for many years. It's not good to be silent on the things that concern you most deeply. It's like a frost that eats into the heart. The frost is melting out of my heart at last, thank God, and I can speak."

He rose, and went to a small oak table in the corner of the library, on which stood a curious steel-bound box of Italian workmanship. This he unlocked, and returned with a miniature, set in diamonds.

"This is the portrait of my wife," he said. "God rest her soul."

The face in the miniature was exactly as my father had described it, a nobly moulded face, with thick bands of hair on either side of the forehead, and dark eyes, full of a peculiar wistful sadness. I looked at it with reverence and sympathy.

"Now sit down, and let me tell you a story that I never expected to tell to any living soul. But first let me ask how much your father told you before you came to me."

"He told me that he visited you just before your marriage—that was the only personal fact he had to communicate. The rest was the account of what happened at Witmarsh, which was public knowledge."

"Well, then, I'll begin with your father's visit to Witmarsh. The reason why I was anxious he should visit me was that I wanted him to see the woman I intended to marry. He saw her, as you know, but I thought I discovered disapproval in his manner. I

was very proud and shy, and so perhaps was he. At all events I allowed myself to feel aggrieved, and for that reason I never communicated with him again. I am the more to blame for this because at the time of my trouble your father wrote me in the most sympathetic spirit. When accident threw you across my path, it was the memory of your father's friendship that first led me to take an interest in you. So if I have wronged your father, I hope I have in some degree made it up to his son."

"My father has no sense of being wronged, I assure you," I said earnestly. "I believe he thinks as kindly of you to-day as when you were boys together at school."

"I'm glad to hear it, but not surprised, because your father was always magnanimous. Besides, you know the old Latin proverb—*Odisse quem Læseris*—

"Forgiveness to the injured doth belong,
But they ne'er pardon who have done the wrong."

He was silent for a few moments. I think his mind was busy in recalling this old friendship, which had been allowed to perish. As I looked at him, so solitary and so old, I had a strong impression that among the saddest memories of age must be the recollection of friendships that were rich in promise of fidelity and constancy, wilfully sacrificed to pique or pride, to some pang of hurt vanity or over-sensitive and foolish egoism.

When he next spoke it was with extraordinary emphasis. He rose from his chair, the miniature in his hand, and cried, "I am a man who has been robbed of everything that makes life worth while. I have been robbed by a lie. I had everything a man could covet one moment, and the next it was snatched away

from me. Don't be surprised if I'm bitter; my only surprise is that I'm not ten thousand times bitterer than I am. I wonder I've not run a-muck long ago like a Malay. I believe there never was an anarchist who was not the product of just such injustices as I have suffered. If I haven't gone altogether mad or wicked it's because of that face—it's the recollection that there is sweetness and fidelity in the world, and that once I possessed them."

He turned, crossed the room, and put the miniature away in the Italian casket.

"Forgive me my emotion," he said. "Now let us sit down quietly, and I will try to show you why the letter you gave me this morning had such an effect on me."

He began by a brief description of the paper-mill, and the strong reasons there were for the greatest caution and secrecy in the manufacture of the paper. It was nearly a century ago when the first Heron established the mill at Witmarsh, and the business had grown into a very rich monopoly. When he—John Heron—left school, he did not go to a university, it not being the custom in those days for the sons of manufacturers to do so. He was privately tutored for a couple of years, and then sent to the Continent for three years, with special introductions to many of the leading bankers. He was supposed to make the grand tour before settling down at Witmarsh, and did so in a complete fashion which is not common nowadays. He visited every European capital, and it was in this way he became interested in art.

"I had no notion that my love of art would ever be a great consolation to me," he said. "In the beginning I took up the study of art because I had nothing else to do. In every capital my friends took me to the great galleries, and I soon began to be interested.

You see my father was very punctilious in his arrangements for my benefit. He had made his mind up that I must remain three years abroad, and if I had returned before the time was up, he would have been seriously annoyed. As for the bankers, I soon grew tired of them. They all talked as if there was nothing in the world worth thinking of but money. I was much too young to take that view of life, and the more they talked money the more I thought art. Indeed, I had serious thoughts of being a painter, and if I had been able to assure myself that I had any real capacity in that direction, I believe I should have refused to succeed my father in the paper-mill. However, I had sense enough to know that I should never make a successful artist; but I spent most of my time in developing my love of pictures, and sometimes in copying them. It was while copying a picture that I first met my wife.

"I was in Florence, and having accomplished my perfunctory courtesies to the banking fraternity, I hastened to explore the glorious riches of the galleries. Day by day I visited the Pitti Palace, and especially the Hall of Saturn, where hangs the exquisite Madonna del Granduca of Raphael. I was so fascinated with this picture that it came almost to possess my mind; I actually dreamed of it, and often, as I walked the streets, I looked round on the finely moulded faces of the Florentine women, idly wondering whether I should find any human face that combined so perfectly the earthly and the spiritual elements of beauty.

"Of course I copied the picture—very badly, I've no doubt. One day, as I was working on my copy, two ladies entered the room. I do not suppose I should have looked up from my canvas, but that I heard them talking in English. To an Englishman,

far from home, especially to one sentenced to a three years' exile, the sound of his own language produces a nostalgia. I was suddenly homesick for the grey skies and fresh lanes of England, and tears filled my eyes at the murmur of those voices, that suggested all the serenity and depth of the English temperament. I did not look up for some time; I was content to listen. I noticed presently that one voice was very different from the other. One—I guessed that it belonged to the older woman—was peremptory and positive: the other was a pure contralto, slow and exquisitely sweet. I thought, 'That's the voice Raphael's Madonna would have, if she could speak—the voice of the soul.' They drew near me, and stood behind me as I worked. A curious shudder seized me, a thrill that might be called magnetic. I felt as though a new atmosphere formed about me. The feeling was so strange and exquisite that I was afraid to turn round, lest I should break the magic spell. At last I did so, with the sense that I could not help myself. I saw the face you have seen in the miniature, and I knew in that instant there was no other woman's face in all the world for me.

"She blushed under my gaze, and I did the same. I rose, offering her my chair that she might be at ease in studying the Madonna Granduca. She thanked me in a low voice. Her companion stood stiffly by, and I could see that she was not pleased. I judged them sisters, which turned out to be the case. The resemblance was strong; each had the same classic features, more Italian than English; but the moral difference was marked. The face of the older sister for all its beauty had a proud and restless expression, a menacing look, and the lips were firm and disdainful. The younger sister seemed moulded from the same model, but by another hand. I thought then, and I've

always thought since, that she resembled the Granduca Madonna; there was the same harmony of warm earthliness and spiritual sanctity.

"Some day you'll perhaps know what it is to adore a woman; I hope so, for I believe it is the noblest feeling of which the human heart is capable. It is something that goes beyond love, so much beyond it, that it is possible for a man to love a woman with fidelity, and even intensity, and yet know nothing of it. It is the sense of one's whole nature being completely filled by a woman's grace, of an inexhaustible delight in her presence, in her movements, her smile, her voice; and a yet deeper delight in her personality, as an efflux of God himself, a divine incarnation of the spiritual beauty which we take to be an attribute of God. I don't express myself clearly, I know; but that is how I loved Millicent Smith. I trembled in her presence with the kind of ecstasy the worshipper has who thinks he sees the Mother of God standing above the altar, or passing him on the moonlit path among the vineyards. Italy is full of such legends; they are the expression of a divine intoxication which fills the soul in the contemplation of absolute beauty. That was my feeling for Millicent. It began in the Pitti Palace in that first vision which I had of her: it has lasted to this hour. It will last till death, and beyond it, if memory and consciousness survive death.

"After a few minutes the sisters moved away, the younger one thanking me with a delightful shyness for my courtesy, the elder contenting herself with a disdainful bow. That day I painted no more. I was so agitated that my hand trembled, and my heart beat violently. The same afternoon I met them again in the Boboli Gardens. They were standing by the Egyptian Obelisk that rises over the great fountain,

gazing on that inimitable picture of Florence, which in the sunset hours seems as unearthly in its beauty as John's New Jerusalem. That same mysterious ecstasy seized me which I had felt earlier in the day. It was as though my soul passed out of me for an instant, and mingled with the soul of this girl who stood beside the fountain. She blushed and bowed her head, and in her blushes I read the signal that my emotion had in some way revealed itself to her. We needed no speech; speech is as often a barrier to emotion as a means of interpretation.

"The English Colony in Florence in those days was small, and I had no difficulty in finding out who the sisters were—or rather, I should say where they lived. They were living at a small pension on the Lung Arno, and their name was Smith. The elder was called Margaret and the younger Millicent. They were travelling alone, and had settled in Florence for the winter on account of Millicent, who was supposed to be delicate. One of my banker friends gave me this information, adding to it in a jesting spirit, that if I wanted to meet them it was by no means difficult, for they used his bank, and nothing would be easier than to invite them to one of his weekly musicales.

"‘To tell you the truth,’ he went on, ‘I am a little interested in them myself, for they brought letters of introduction to me from a young banker in England, who, I believe, is engaged to the elder sister. I ought to have sought their better acquaintance long ago, but the fact is that they seem to shun society, and are not at all accessible.’

"I asked him if he knew anything of their family.

"‘Nothing at all,’ he said. ‘There was an elderly man with them, I believe, when they arrived, but he left as soon as they were settled in their pension. I

understood he was their father, and I thought it strange that he did not come to see me, knowing, as he must have done, that his daughters had letters of introduction to me. However, I daresay he had his reasons, and it is no affair of mine who they were. You Englishmen are all eccentric, eh, my friend? You do what you please, and don't care what other people think of you. However, there's no doubt the women are charming, and I shall take pleasure in making you acquainted with them.'

"The next week he was as good as his word. He lived in an old palace, occupying a vast suite of rooms on the second floor, in the largest of which he held his musicale. I can still recall every feature of that room; the vast painted ceiling, the old pictures and carved Renaissance furniture, the four windows opening on a narrow balcony, and the little stage at the end of the room where the musicians played. It was about nine o'clock when the sisters entered. Margaret was elaborately dressed, and looked like a portrait by Bronzino. Millicent was dressed in the simplest white robe, and looked more than ever like Raphael's Madonna. I was introduced by my friend, who volunteered the information that I was making the tour of the Banks of Europe for business reasons. Margaret's proud impassive face quickened into sudden interest at this news. She became quite friendly, and seemed resolved to atone for her former brusqueness by an almost effusive interest in my travels. This appeared to me quite natural under the circumstances. As a stranger painting in the Pitti I was a person of no account, but as a person with a definite place in society I merited some consideration. In my effort to respond to her advances I told her all about Witmarsh, and she asked many shrewd questions about the paper-mills. All this time Millicent sat silent, and

I thought her face had a grieved and alarmed expression. I noticed presently that she was quite pale, and said, 'Your sister does not seem well.'

" 'It's the heat of the room,' said Margaret. 'Take her out on the balcony. The air will do her good.'

"Millicent rose obediently, and we went out on the balcony. For the first time I was alone with her. The heavy curtain dropped over the window; above us rose the starry sky, and beneath the star-sown river and the twinkling lights on the Ponte Vecchio.

" 'Millicent,' I whispered.

"I took her hand, and it trembled almost as much as my own. Through my mind there galloped all the tender phrases I had rehearsed night and day since the hour when first I saw her. But I could utter none of them. My heart swelled within me, till I felt suffocated. She was as incapable of speech as I. I saw her eyes gleaming in the soft gloom, her lips open in surprise; and then she gently swayed toward me like a tall white lily, and lay within my arms. She recovered instantly, drew back from me, and said, 'Now, go away. Leave me, please.'

" 'I will never leave you,' I contrived to say, and I was startled at the sound of my own voice.

" 'You must. It is best. O believe me, it is best.'

" 'But why? Don't you know I love you?'

" 'Yes. But you don't know me. If you knew me you wouldn't.'

" 'Nothing I could know of you can ever change this one fact—I love you, dear. And I shall love you forever.'

"She drew a long sigh, like a swimmer who gives up contending with a current too strong for him.

" 'For to-night then,' she whispered. 'One night.'

" 'Forever,' I replied.

"She made no further resistance. Upon that bal-

cony, under that starry sky, I spoke words a man speaks but once. We were shut off from the world. It was as though we had entered eternity, and our souls alone lived. Love, like death, frees the soul. It was with a pang almost physical, such as the drowning feel when forced back to life, that I heard after a long while the bells chime eleven across the city. The curtain was drawn back, and I saw Margaret's face. She did not seem surprised or indignant: she smiled, and said calmly, 'It's time to go, Millicent. I hope the fresh air has done you good.' We three went together through the silent city to the pension. At the door I parted from the two sisters, and went away to walk all night through the empty streets, incapable of sleep, inebriated with a happiness that I had never conceived to be possible. The dawn found me sitting on the steps of the old church at Fiesole, whispering to myself, 'Millicent loves me.' A bell rang: the door opened: a few country women entered the church, and I went with them, and, kneeling before the dim-lit altar, gave thanks to God for my supreme happiness, and prayed for wisdom that my passion might be worthy.

"In the afternoon of that day I called at the pension, and was received by Margaret, who told me her sister was not well, and could not see me.

" 'She has always been rather delicate,' she said, 'and I am in a special way responsible for her.'

"She smiled an enigmatic smile, and added quietly, 'My responsibility doesn't end with her health!'

"I thereupon told her that I wished to marry Millicent. She heard me with a kind of grave sympathy, for which I should have been more grateful if I had believed it quite genuine. For already I was aware of something hidden in her thoughts, and instinctively I sought for motives which were not apparent. How-

ever, she treated me on this occasion with a frankness which left no loophole for suspicion.

"'We are not rich,' she said, 'and we are orphans. There is nothing I should desire more than to see my sister married happily. But you will understand that this is a great responsibility for me, which I do not wish to bear alone. I also am engaged to be married, and I expect my fiancé in Florence before long. I think we should wait till he comes before you enter into any formal engagement with Millicent. Now don't look so disappointed—he will probably be here next week.'

"Of course I thought immediately of what my banker friend had told me of the elderly man who had accompanied the two girls to Florence, whom he had supposed to be their father. Was this Margaret's lover? I was injudicious enough to ask whether the gentleman who had been with them when they came to Florence might not be informed of my attachment to Millicent.

"'What gentleman?' she said sharply.

"'The friend who was with you when you came to Florence.'

"'O, why that was our courier,' she replied with a peal of laughter. 'He travelled with us from London, and returned as soon as we were settled. What an extraordinary idea that any one should have supposed him a relation! But there—I suppose Florence gossips like any other place—but really gossip ought to have some regard for probability to be amusing, don't you think?'

"It struck me that her laughter was a little forced, and that her explanation was not convincing. It was hardly likely that my banker-friend could have mistaken a courier for the father of these two charming women. But I was not in a mood to be critical. I

was deeply in love, it was to my interest to be on good terms with Millicent's sister, and it seemed clear that Margaret was well-disposed toward me. She talked for a long time with freedom and cordiality, and it was not until I left her that I realised that she had told me very little about herself. Beyond the fact that the sisters had lived in London I had learned nothing. On the contrary I had been led into a very full statement about myself.

"‘How romantic!’ Margaret had exclaimed, when I described to her the ways of life at Witmarsh. ‘I didn’t think business could be so romantic. Do you never fear that your secrets may be discovered?’

"‘That is impossible,’ I replied. ‘They are too safely guarded.’

"‘And I suppose in due time you’ll be initiated into them? You are to be a partner with your father, aren’t you?’

"‘I expect to be.’

"‘And because I was her sister’s suitor, I went on to speak a little effusively of my prospects. I wanted her to understand that I should be in a position to give Millicent more than average comfort; if not exactly wealth, certainly more than moderate competence.

"‘Well,’ she said, as I rose to go, ‘you have been very frank, and I thank you for it. There’s only one thing I ought to tell you: Millicent is not very strong. O no—you need not look alarmed—she is perfectly healthy, but London has never suited her—it has the effect of depressing her vitality. She needs country air, and it would be a good thing for her to live in a place like Witmarsh.’

"A week later Margaret’s lover arrived. He was a tall dark young fellow, with a suavity of manner which I found offensive. He had a trick of rubbing

his hands together as he talked, which I detested. You will no doubt have guessed his name. It was Overberg."

"Mr. Overberg of Barton?" I exclaimed.

"The same. But he was a very different kind of person in those days from the prosperous banker you know, except for his mannerisms. I gathered from hints he dropped that he had been a wild liver, and that worst species of the breed, a sly one. Certainly he had gambled pretty heavily by his own confession. He was fond of talking of the ease with which fortunes were made on the Stock Exchange, and he was not above the stupidity of having a scheme of his own by which the bank at Monte Carlo might be broken. I believe he had tried his precious scheme with the usual results, for when he reached Florence he was unmistakably hard up. However, he carried himself with a good deal of gaiety, and was usually in high spirits. He professed that he had sown all his wild oats, financial and otherwise, and looked forward to a life of sober industry with eagerness. I was not so sure of the truth of these professions; there were times when he looked anxious and haggard, and he had hours of deep dejection. However, he appeared sincerely attached to Margaret; and if she was satisfied with him I had no call to interfere, for she certainly knew a great deal more about him than I did.

"The coming of Overberg had the effect of throwing me into the constant society of Millicent. My engagement was tacitly recognised by the four of us. Day by day I wandered through Florence in a lover's ecstasy, and there is no city that can feed this ecstasy from so many subtle sources. The legends of romantic love that met one everywhere, the idyll of Dante and Beatrice, the stories of great painters and the dear dead women whom their art immortalised,

the gardens and the churches, the very air so sweet with flowers, so soft and warm,—all these things fed the flame of love, and helped to make love appear the one divine business of human life. Every hour I found new perfections in Millicent, and new adorations filled my heart. Only one thing troubled me, from time to time Millicent renewed her protest against our marriage.

“‘I fear you may regret it, dear’—that was the burden of her protest.

“But as the days passed her protest grew fainter. I interpreted it as a form of that adorable humility which Dante makes a feature of a divine love. Her slow yielding to my passion, her shy advances and retreats, her mingled reluctance and delight, overwhelmed me with a tenderness that often left me on the verge of tears—tears that sprang from an agony of joy. So a month passed, and the time came when we must return to England. Before we left Florence, Overberg and Margaret were married at the English Church. It was arranged when we reached England that Millicent should spend a few weeks at Witmarsh in the house of Mrs. Withers. This was done that my father might have the opportunity of meeting her, and in my pride and joy I felt sure that he had but to know her to love her. Unfortunately this was not the case. My father had a vast deal of family pride, and he had his own ideas of the kind of marriage he wished me to make. It was then that I took my affairs into my own hands and married Millicent. We returned to Witmarsh immediately after the wedding and lived in Mrs. Withers’ cottage. My father died soon after, and I took his place in the mill. Before he died he forgave me, and with his forgiveness the last cloud on my horizon disappeared.

“So now you have the main history of that part of

my life which explains all that follows. The rest—the dark and dreadful part—how can I tell it?”

He was so visibly distressed, he looked so old and worn, that it was a relief when William entered with his curt announcement, “Dinner, Mr. Heron.”

“Very well, William,” he replied. And then, turning to me—“The rest can wait. But before we sleep to-night you shall know all.”

I did not tell him that I now had an urgent curiosity to know the end of the story: for I now knew who Lucille’s mother was, and had a premonition of the nature of that shame and sorrow which had cast so deep a shadow over her young heart.

Mr. Heron little knew how much he was contributing to my own love-story while he told his own.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE CRIME AT WITMARSH

IN the quiet of the library after dinner that night Mr. Heron completed his story.

"My marriage was ideally happy," he said. "There were times indeed when my happiness seemed almost unbearably great. I lived at such a height and stress of feeling that I often felt as if I could endure no more and live. Don't think I am exaggerating: the language I am using is really colourless as an expression of truth. It was as though every sense in me was intensified to the point of ecstasy. The mere act of breathing was a bliss. The scent and beauty of flowers, the colours of a sunset, the movement of clouds, wrought in me a delight that had in it the poignancy of tears. I had never conceived such a possibility of happiness in human nature. It was the happiness of a divine excess, that carried me beyond the human. I had transcended human nature, and moved in a world of new dimensions. And the secret force of this emancipation, this transfiguration rather, was the adoring passion which I had for Millicent.

"My father, stern and precise as he was, came completely under the spell of Millicent. He was prepared to dislike her, but her grace and beauty won him in spite of himself. It was to me both amusing and pathetic to observe his effort to maintain his dislike, and his entire inability to do so. Yet she did nothing to win his regard, nothing that was designed

or calculated, I mean. It was the efflux of her own nature, the overflowing of herself that won him.

"One reservation, however, he kept to the last.

" 'She is one of the noblest women I have ever met,' he said, 'but I could wish we knew more about her family. It is a very serious trust we hold in the mill, something which concerns the nation itself, and it is of importance that we should have exact knowledge of any family that becomes related to us by marriage.'

"This observation I knew to be just, and it was the very justice of it that made it bitter to me. It had the effect of putting Millicent on her defence, and in the heat of youth and passion I replied that I married her for herself and not for her family.

" 'That is easily said,' he replied, 'but as a matter of fact it is not true. No woman can be considered apart from her family. Sooner or later the man who marries has to reckon with the family of his wife.'

"This remark of my father's, much as I resented it, sank into my mind. I reflected that all I knew of Millicent's family was the one fact that the sisters had lived in London, and that they were orphans. I rather congratulated myself that they appeared to have few or no relations, for one of the trials of a newly married man is to find himself pushed, by the mere fact of marriage, into intimate relations with a number of persons whom he has never seen, and may cordially dislike. Yet I was sufficiently influenced by my father's observation to begin to wish for fuller information, and one summer night, as we sat in the warm dusk on the heath, I contrived to lead up to the subject. Millicent met my advances with perfect frankness.

" 'I've wondered you've not asked the question before,' she said. 'You have taken me so much on faith,

dear, and I've loved you for it. But alas, there's very little to tell, for I've always been lonely. And I've often envied other girls who had hosts of friends and relatives, while I've grown up alone.'

"She then went on to tell me all that she remembered of her girlhood. It had been spent in an old red-brick house in Epping Forest. It was a life secluded as a bird's; all round the green forest and the silence. Very few friends came to the house. A man whom she believed to be her guardian came at intervals, and sometimes he brought other men with him, but no women. She had always understood that her father was an inventor of brilliant parts; of her mother she knew nothing. Both had died young. Her guardian had been uniformly kind to her, but his visits had grown rarer as time went on, and the sisters had been left more and more to themselves.

"'I'm not sorry now that my girlhood was so lonely,' she added. 'God was keeping me for you, dear.'

"Some other details of minor importance she added to this statement. When she was sixteen the home in Epping Forest was given up. There was a brief residence in London, then a removal to France, where she lived in a quaint village near Dieppe: and finally came Italy, with winters spent in Rome and Florence.

"'It was my great trouble in these wanderings that I had no friends. You can't think how dreary life may become even in places that are the most beautiful and interesting, if you are without friends. After a time you tire of seeing things—always seeing things—and you feel as if you'd gladly exchange all Florence for one tiny house where some one lit the lamp at night especially for you, and welcomed you—some one who was really yours. Of course,

we had introductions sometimes, but they never led to much. It was no doubt our fault. We had become self-centred by the isolation of our lives, and neither my sister nor myself found it easy to maintain social intercourse. And then you came, dear—and I'm ashamed to think how easily you won me. I think I knew that I was meant for you the first moment when we met. I should be ashamed to say it, but I'm not. I'm proud and glad.'

"I well remember the night when this conversation took place. We watched the sun sink behind the hills of heather, and the black belt of pines. The full moon arose as the sun set. We sat hand in hand, and the deep silence round us made us feel as if we were the only conscious creatures in the world. We drew close and closer still together, till her dear head lay upon my shoulder. The rising moon silvered all things, and gleamed in her eyes as she spoke. In that hour I rejoiced that she was so alone in the world; that none could share her; that she was so intimately and so solely mine. Her very loneliness was a dedication. I thought of her as one created for a special destiny, preserved aloof and sacred for it, coming to it at last, as to a foreordained vocation. And that night, just before we rose to go, she whispered in my ear the most joyous and awful news a woman's lips can utter. Before us, as we walked slowly back to the white cottage in its fragrant garden, I seemed to see, running in the moonlight, lifting tiny hands to bathe themselves in the silver ripples, the little child that should be mine and hers.

"A day or two later my wife received a letter which had a most alarming effect on her. When I came home to lunch I found her pale and distraught. She did not tell me she had received a letter: I gathered this from Mrs. Withers. It was the first time she had

concealed anything from me. I was too proud to ask a confidence she was not prepared to give, but I was very uneasy and unhappy. That night I was wakened by her sobbing. I did what I could to comfort her, but she maintained silence on the cause of her distress.

"'You must trust me, dear,' was all that she would say.

"This pitiful appeal went to my heart. I assured her that nothing could make me distrust her, and after a while her tears ceased, and she fell asleep in my arms.

"The trouble, whatever it was, seemed to blow over. Several weeks passed, during which we enjoyed unbroken happiness. If sometimes the thought of this mysterious letter troubled me, I made haste to dismiss it from my thoughts. I had a shrewd suspicion that her correspondent was her sister. This appeared a natural deduction, for she had no friends who were likely to communicate with her. I had already gathered from her that her relations with her sister had not always been cordial. She was very loyal to her, however; I do not remember one harsh word; she always spoke of her with kindness. But one can learn a good deal from an attitude of mind as well as from words, and I had already judged her sister as proud and imperious. I told myself that probably some dispute had arisen between the sisters over something private to themselves, which was no concern of mine.

"Suddenly Margaret Overberg appeared upon the scene. We had, of course, invited her to visit us many times, but hitherto she had excused herself. She was now staying in London, and it was natural she should take this opportunity of visiting us.

"She was in high spirits, full of talk about London

theatres and concerts, but when her face was in repose I noticed that it looked worn and anxious. She professed herself delighted with Witmarsh, with its air, its scenery, and above all with our simple cottage. But from the moment she arrived I noticed a change in Millicent. She became pale, and I thought I detected in her signs of some secret distress. More than once when I came home from the mill I found my wife in tears. I began heartily to wish that Margaret would leave us. I could see that she exercised a disturbing effect on Millicent which, in her condition, might prove positively perilous. But, of course, I could say nothing. I had nothing to go upon but vague suspicions. What I most resented was that a cloud seemed to have arisen between myself and my wife. She clung to me with an almost pathetic fondness; her affection seemed even to have grown in intensity, but I was conscious that there were thoughts in her mind which I did not share. It was a happy day for me when Margaret left us, and I quietly resolved that it should be a long time before I asked her to visit us again.

"A day or two after she left a singular thing happened: my wife came down to the mill to see me. Now this may seem natural enough, but you must remember that no one not employed in the mill was allowed to enter it on any pretext. During all the years of my father's married life my mother had never once crossed the threshold of the mill. It was forbidden territory. I myself never entered it till I was employed in it. It was Stanchion's father who came to me with the news that my wife was waiting for me in my outer office.

" 'Did you let her in?' I said sternly.

" 'I couldn't say No to the young lady,' he replied. 'She looked ill, and said she must see you.'

"‘O, that alters the case,’ I replied, and ran hastily into the outer office.

"‘I was so lonely,’ she pleaded. ‘And I had a fear that something might have happened to you. I had to see you, dear.’

"‘But, my dear girl, what should happen? It’s not more than two hours since I left you.’

"‘Two hours is such a long time when you’re quite alone. You imagine all sorts of dreadful things. And it isn’t summer now, and the heath is dreary.’

"‘So it is,’ I replied, ‘and it’s thoughtless of me that I’ve forgotten it. We’ll move down into the Mill-house after Christmas.’

"‘No, no,’ she cried hysterically, ‘I don’t want to leave the cottage. We’ve been so happy there, and I’ve the feeling we shall never be so happy anywhere else. But when you’re away all sorts of sad thoughts come to me, and I feel as though my happiness was slipping from me.’

"I comforted her as best I could, and after a while she smiled at her own fears.

"‘Please forgive me,’ she said. ‘I know I’ve acted foolishly.’

"My heart went out to her in tenderest pity.

"‘Wait a moment, dear, and I will go home with you,’ I said.

"I went back into my inner office for my hat and coat, and was detained there by some unfinished business for perhaps a quarter of an hour. When I returned she was sitting patiently beside the window, looking out on the rain that was falling drearily. We went up the road, she clinging to me, for the wind had risen and black clouds were rolling down from the heath. Once at home, we sat before a bright wood fire, and she was in better spirits than I had seen her for a long time. We dined early, and after

dinner returned again to the fireside. The wind was blowing a gale now, and the rain drove in sheets against the windows. She sat on the floor, with her head on my knees, and never did she open her heart to me so completely as on that night. She spoke of those intimate things which are not often mentioned even between husband and wife—how as a little girl she had longed for motherhood, how she had prayed for it, and, now that it was coming, how unworthy she felt of it. As a child, dolls had been her one delight—to her they were real creatures, and she used to think she could hear their hearts beat. Her first thought when she woke in the morning was that perhaps her doll had turned into a real child in the night—its heart might have started beating.

“Did your sister think the same kind of thoughts?” I interpolated.

“No, she was different. We’ve never been alike. I’d rather not speak of her, please.”

“My unfortunate question seemed to break the spell. She rose with a wistful smile, and went to bed. When I followed her, I found that she was writing at the little table by the window, and I stole downstairs on tiptoe, unwilling to interrupt her. When I returned again she was in bed, her arm beneath her head, sleeping softly: and as I looked on her, so lovely in the calm unconsciousness of sleep, I knelt down and thanked God with a new fervour for the divine gift he had given me in Millicent.

“That very night the mill was robbed. In the dark of the morning I was roused by Stanchion, who brought the news. A large quantity of the bank-note paper had disappeared.

“Of course the best detectives in England were in Witmarsh within a few hours. The public consternation was extreme. If this paper was in the hands of

expert note counterfeiters, as no doubt it was, there was nothing to prevent them from flooding the market with spurious notes which would defy detection. Your father explained that to you. The Crown jewels in the Tower might have been stolen with less disastrous consequences to society than a few packages of the famous Witmarsh paper.

"I can't relate all the stages of the enquiry that ensued. But there were two facts on which the detectives seized at once. The one was that my wife had visited the mill in the morning before the crime, which was a breach of all traditional rules, and the other that I had been absent from the mill for several hours. At first I did not grasp the significance of these circumstances. It was inconceivable to me that either myself or my wife should be objects of suspicion. But I soon found that the detectives attached great importance to my wife's visit to the mill and my subsequent absence. They argued that the robbery could have been carried out only by accomplices within the mill. For what motive could my wife have come to the mill a few hours before the robbery, and why should I have chosen this very time to be absent from it?

"When suspicion once starts, it is amazing how many innocent circumstances can be discovered to support it. My wife had been alone in the outer office for a quarter of an hour. She had betrayed great agitation. The master-key of the strong-room where the finished piles of paper were stacked was kept in the office. This key had disappeared. What more possible than that she had stolen it? A strange man had been noticed in Witmarsh that very morning. It was possible he was the actual thief; and since everything was possible to the ingenious mind of a detective, it might have happened that my wife

had stolen the key and found means to convey it to him. An absurd tissue of nonsense; I laughed at it. But before two days had passed I found it no laughing matter.

"The crashing blow fell when the detectives discovered that my wife's father had not been an inventor, as she had told me, but an expert counterfeiter, who had died in gaol. That Millicent did not know this was certain. She was an infant when her father died. She had no recollection of him. The man who had acted as her guardian was her father's friend. He could not be found.

"In the end, as you know, my wife was arrested. Of all that passed between us in the terrible days that followed I will say nothing. That she was absolutely innocent I was sure. And yet I was aware of some secret which she withheld from me. I racked my brains to guess what it was, and in vain. She died in silence. And now after all those years I know her secret. Margaret Overberg was the criminal and Millicent knew it."

"Margaret Overberg!" I cried in horror.

"It was she. That last letter written by my wife explains everything: 'You have always mastered me from the hour when I was a little girl, and now this must cease. I have done wrong to obey you so far, but, understand, I obey you no longer. Dear sister, think of me as dead——'"

"I don't understand."

"Don't you?" said Mr. Heron grimly. "Well, let me add something. Overberg was a banker and a spendthrift. Does that suggest nothing?"

"You think he planned the robbery?"

"I do. And Margaret tried her best to win Millicent to the scheme and failed. No doubt she got certain information from her. So far Millicent was

mastered by the cunning and imperious will of Margaret. But she guessed what was meant, and no doubt it was the bitterness of her position that drove her that fatal morning to seek me at the mill. I think she meant to tell me, but a false loyalty to her sister closed her lips. She died loyal to a false and bad woman."

Mr. Heron rose. The tears were streaming down his cheeks. I faced him, with the consciousness of a great horror, like a savage hand, crumpling my heart up, and squeezing the blood out. He noticed my looks and laid his hand on my shoulder.

"My dear boy——" he began. "Why, what is it? You're ill."

I contrived to stand upright, but I felt my strength running out of me, and I heard my voice, a long way off, saying very deliberately, "But Mrs. Overberg is Lucille's mother."

He looked at me enquiringly. "But who is Lucille?"

"Lucille—Overberg—and I love her. She is to me what Millicent Smith was to you——"

The hand at my heart had squeezed the last drop of blood out. I heard it drip—drip on the floor. I saw a great Cross that swam up from Mr. Heron's shoulders.—It hovered, blood-stained, a moment in the air.—Then it fell with crashing force on me.—

For the first and last time in my life I fainted.

CHAPTER XXV

THE FATE OF MARGARET

AN hour later, when my consciousness returned, I found myself in bed with Mr. Heron sitting silently beside me. All that night he sat beside me, attending to my wants with the anxious tenderness of an old nurse. I could not sleep; it seemed to me that I should never sleep again. Across my brain there streamed all the pictures of my past life,—an endless film, full of moving figures, bathed in strong light, infinitely vivid and terrifying. I could forget them only by speaking of them. The moment I closed my eyes they began to race past again. Mr. Heron, with an intuitive comprehension of my misery, at last encouraged me to talk, and in the dead of the night he drew my story from me.

I told him of my childish love for Lucille, of my meeting with her in the Abbey, of the shadow on her life, of her disappearance from London, of my despair of ever finding her again, and the keener despair I had in feeling myself unworthy of her.

"It is right that you should feel that," he said softly. "No man is ever worthy of a good and pure woman. But that is the divine thing about women—they are like God, they don't love us because of our worthiness, but for the mere joy of loving. And they never love so deeply as when they have something to forgive."

"Life seems so complicated," I moaned.

"It seems so, but is it?" he replied. "I think it is

only complicated when we make it so. It is really very simple. And the simplest thing of all is love. If you really love Lucille and she loves you, nothing will keep you apart. If either you or she count the world's opinion as more important than love, then you don't truly love, and you deserve to be parted."

Later he said a thing which I have never forgotten. I had used the word *irreparable*. He stopped me with a gesture and said: "That is an atheist's word. It ignores God. It is a black lie, born in the darkness of a graceless and unbelieving heart." He was silent a moment, and continued: "Nothing human is irreparable, and I think I ought to know. Think of what I have suffered; yet I am alive, in good health, and have found life interesting. When the great blow fell I felt that life for me was over. For weeks I contemplated suicide. I studied eagerly the records of suicide that I might find the easiest way to make my exit. In the midst of my misery I found myself one day taking an interest in flowers. I recall vividly the occasion; it was a summer morning, and something in the beauty of a rose-bush in my garden drew my gaze. I remembered that the year before this same rose-bush had appeared ruined, and I had given orders that it should be rooted up. My wife begged me to spare it, and I did so. She pruned and sprayed it, loosened the soil round its roots, and nursed it as a mother nurses a sick child. It recovered. Here it was, with the dew sparkling on it, laden with bloom, quietly intent on living, and triumphantly succeeding. I said to myself, 'Isn't this a parable for me?' Suddenly there came to me a sensation of the beauty of the world, the essential beauty of all life, and my eyes filled with tears. If the rose had outlived its ruin, why could I not? The words of the old Hebrew

poet rang through my mind: 'He shall give thee beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness.' Beauty for ashes—what became, then, of the thought that there is anything in life that could be justly called irreparable? From that moment I began to live again—feebly at first, but at the root of my being was a quickening force which gradually grew stronger. I know I bear the scars of that great calamity, as the rose-bush showed the work of the shears upon it, as the burnt-over land has ashes commingled in its soil, but there's blossom, too."

It was very thrilling to hear in the silence of the night that wise voice, and very comforting. Gradually my hysteria ebbed away, and the plain outline of things became visible once more. One question, however, I burned to ask, and at last I uttered it. What had become of Lucille's mother?

"I believe she died," said Mr. Heron.

"Lucille spoke of her as having gone away. I always imagined that she was divorced."

"I never heard that. I saw her only once after my wife's death. We met by accident in Regent Street, and her appearance shocked me. Her face was not so much changed as ravaged—do you understand? The beauty was there still, but it was beauty of form only; the bloom was gone, as though something had seared and scorched it. She made as though she would avoid me; then, on a sudden impulse, turned back and faced me. I had never liked her; but her appearance might have excited pity in her worst enemy, and I impulsively stretched out my hand to her, and said, 'Margaret.'"

"She did not take my hand. I ignored the affront, and uttered some meaningless words about being surprised to see her.

"I have left him," she said in a dull voice.

"Left whom?" I asked.

"My husband," she replied.

"But why?"

"That is my affair."

"Then why tell me?"

"O, merely because you happen to be my brother-in-law, and I suppose you ought to know," she said scornfully.

"I persuaded her to come into a restaurant and drink a cup of tea. The tea refreshed her, and she said with a sullen gratitude, which sounded much like irony, 'You are very good.'"

"Presently she volunteered the statement that she was going abroad.

"Alone?" I asked.

"Certainly," she replied. "Didn't I tell you I had left my husband? And my child," she added with a curious break in her voice.

"She recovered her proud composure instantly, and began to talk glibly about various places on the Continent she had known as a girl. Did I know Perugia? It was like an eagle's nest on the summit of a mountain. Or Siena? There was a marvellous Cathedral there of black and white marble, with a floor that was etched with pictures. There were places in Spain, too, which fell asleep four centuries ago and had never wakened—Burgos, and Toledo, and Ronda. Tired people could sleep there, for no one was awake. And then with a mirthless laugh she added: 'Well, I'm not going to any of these. I'm going where no one can follow me.'"

"I don't ask where you are going," I said; "but it is clear you are in trouble, and, if you will let me, I should like to help you."

"No one can help me," she said bitterly. "I've

made my bed and I must lie on it. There's only one thing I have to say: be sure of it I have very good reasons for leaving Mr. Overberg. You will in all probability never know those reasons, and I don't wish that you should. I shall be glad if you will conveniently forget that you have seen me. Perhaps it would have been better for you if we had never met.'

"That was her last word. Over that mean marble-topped table in a London restaurant a tragedy completed itself. She went out into the street, and was lost to sight in the great procession of human life. I suppose she went abroad, as she had proposed to do. From Mr. Overberg I never heard a word. Through a roundabout source I heard some years later that he was married again. My natural conclusion was that Margaret was dead."

"And have you no theory of what it all meant?" I asked.

He hesitated a moment, and then said: "I never had until to-day, but since I read that letter I've begun to see some dim outline of a theory."

"Will you let me hear it? I wouldn't ask, but you see it concerns me, too."

"I've no reason to conceal it, except the general one that I don't like theorising, because when we invent a hypothesis we usually invent one that marches with our own wishes. The will to believe, you know, will make any belief credible, even the most absurd."

"But you have some facts to go upon, haven't you?"

"I've only one fact that is new. It is clear that Margaret coerced her sister to do something she refused to do. The circumstances suggest inevitably what that something was. Now suppose Margaret was in her turn coerced by her husband? It doesn't

excuse her, but it explains her. He was a gambler, a speculator, and thoroughly unscrupulous. No doubt he was perfectly aware of the past history of the two sisters when he married Margaret. He saw the chance of profiting by his knowledge. Margaret, as his wife, was wholly in his hands. She may have been forced into the conspiracy. I can conceive that as possible. I can also conceive that when the dénouement came, and her sister died, a fearful remorse came to her, and one effect of it was a bitter hatred of her husband. That would account for her leaving him. I can imagine nothing else that would."

"Then Overberg was the real criminal," I cried.

"I think so. But, as I said, perhaps I think so because I wish to do so. I would like to think that Margaret had some excuse for her wickedness."

"O, Mr. Heron," I exclaimed, "don't you see what this means to Lucille? If she could know that her mother was not so guilty as she seems—that there were excuses, great excuses——"

"Then she would feel the cloud of shame lifted?"

"Just so. And she might allow her heart to love me."

"But how can we know the truth, my dear boy?"

"I don't know. But somehow I think we can find out. There was something Stanchion said about you when he talked to me at Witmarsh. He always remembered a saying of yours when you went away—may I tell you what it was?"

"Certainly."

"He said that you told him justice wasn't always justice, but right was always right, and in the long run right is always done. He was a boy at the time, and the words impressed him deeply."

"I remember it perfectly. He carried my bag to the station, and I gave him half-a-sovereign."

"He has it still. He thought it too much for his small services to you. He is keeping it in the belief that you'll come back some day, when he means to return it."

I could see that Mr. Heron was touched, and there was a quaver in his voice as he said: "That's like the Stanchions. It renews one's faith in human nature to have known such men. 'In the long run right is always done'—I don't know how I came to say such a thing at such a time. I can only explain it as the voice of an obstinate intuition, a voice from some deeper self, conscious of a diviner syllogism than the reason dare accept. Well, let us try to accept it now. Certainly it seems truer now than it did then. And now, my dear boy, try to go to sleep."

The grey dawn was breaking. A pale light filled the room, and through the still air the voice of Big Ben was heard, solemnly mourning at the grave of time. Mr. Heron stood at the foot of my bed, his face strangely transfigured in that ghostly dawn-light. Presently he said in a low hesitating voice: "Robert, there's something I would like to do before we say good-night. Don't you think we might say the Lord's Prayer together?"

I bowed my head in silence, and he began in a trembling voice that immortal series of petitions in which the souls of men, through so many troubled generations, have sought refuge from the isolation and self-centredness of life.

"'Our Father, who art in Heaven——'"

What mystery of peace was this, which descended like an invisible balm upon our tired nerves, which enfolded us like a soft embrace, so that in the magic of a moment all our troubles dissolved into nothingness? This moment they were, and the next they

were not—mere bubbles that disappeared, the earth itself like a bubble of coloured air that sank beneath our feet, while we passed upward into those upper ways of air and space where it is always daylight.

He concluded the prayer, and, bending over me, kissed me. I hope I am guilty of no irreverence when I say I felt as if God had kissed me; as if that other Father, to whom we had both prayed, stooped over me, and left upon my lips and heart the healing warmth of His divine embrace. The first long beams of morning fell across the room. A great peacefulness filled my heart, and in five minutes I was asleep.

When I woke it was noonday. In answer to my bell William brought me some breakfast, and the morning paper. He stood at the end of my bed, watching me with a curious vigilance, the meaning of which I understood when he remarked that Mr. Heron had gone out, and had left orders that I was to remain in bed till his return.

"But I want to get up, William," I remonstrated.

"Orders is orders," said William grimly.

He therefore proceeded to collect my clothes, which he put outside the door.

"In bed he said you was to stay, and in bed you'll stay, young man, even if I 'as to sit upon your 'ead. Not that I bears you any ill-will, but orders is orders."

Thereupon he left the room, and left me to my thoughts.

These thoughts naturally centred round the extraordinary circumstances of the previous night and they gradually cohered round the one question, What became of Margaret Overberg? Mr. Heron believed she was dead, and since Mr. Overberg had married again the supposition appeared entirely reasonable. But Mr. Heron had no proof. It was obvious that the secret of the Witmarsh crime lay with her. Even

if she were dead, would she not have left behind some statement which either exonerated herself or palliated her conduct? If she still lived, would she be willing to tell the truth? The theory that she still lived appeared on the face of it absurd. Mr. Overberg, unscrupulous as he was, would hardly have risked a second marriage which he knew to be bigamous. It was probable that he believed her dead. And yet, as I lay there in the quiet of that sunny room, there grew up in my mind a conviction that Margaret Overberg was not dead. Most men and women are conscious at times of convictions which appear to have no basis either in fact or reason. They rise silently from some inner depth, like bright bubbles from deep water. They appear tremulous, fragile, evanescent, but they indicate some living force deeply hidden and concealed. It was so that I felt now. Without a single fact to support the hypothesis, I had an instinctive feeling that Margaret was alive. It was as though in the silence of the room her spirit stood, endeavouring to touch mine; a voiceless presence that expressed itself not by speech, but by an eager pressure on my own soul.

That evening I ventured to put the case to Mr. Heron. He listened at first with incredulity, but as I went on speaking I noticed a growing attention. When I had finished he said gravely: "I don't deny things might be as you imagine, but what I don't see is how they would help you with Lucille. Suppose it were possible to exonerate Lucille's mother—well, you only do so by still further implicating her father."

"I don't think that would matter so much," I replied. "It is her mother whom she holds in adoring memory. The tragedy of her childhood was that 'her mother went away,' as she puts it—the tragedy of her womanhood is that she suspects that she went

away as the result of some indelible disgrace. With her father it is different. She may love him in a way, but no girl loves her father in the same way that she loves her mother."

"That's a new point of view to me. You see, I never had a child that lived. But I think I see what you mean—girls give affection to their fathers, but worship to their mothers, eh?"

"Something like that, I imagine. At all events, I am sure it's so with Lucille."

"Well, let us grant that I'll grant another thing, too, that it would be an unspeakable relief to me if I could find any proof that Margaret was less guilty than I have imagined her. But, whether she is dead or living, she has passed so completely into oblivion that she is really lost to us. Remember how many years have elapsed since that day in Regent Street when I saw her for the last time."

"But have you no clue, no hint at all of where she went?"

"None whatever. Yet—well—let me see——"

He appeared to be searching his memory for something that eluded him. At length he said: "There was something, but I never regarded it as a clue, because I was not looking for one."

"Do you mind telling me what it was?"

"Not at all, only I beg you not to attach a false importance to it. Briefly it is this. I think it must have been seven or eight years after that parting in Regent Street that I came upon a small portrait of a woman in one of my picture hunts. It was quite modern, and had probably not been painted more than two years. I take little interest in modern pictures, as you know, and was about to pass it by when something in the face caught my attention. It bore an extraordinary resemblance to Margaret. The face

was worn and thin, but there was no mistaking the eyes and mouth, which expressed a sort of despairing pride and sadness. It was very roughly painted, with a free hand and a daring use of the palette knife, and bore evidence of being a rapid sketch for a larger picture. I asked the man who kept the shop where he got it.

"'From an Italian,' he replied. 'A great many Italians live round here, and they often bring me things.'

"'Did he tell you anything about it?'

"'God bless you, sir, they all tell wonderful stories about where they get the things they want you to buy. I believe he did tell me some tale about a palace in Italy, at which I laughed. But there's one thing sure about it, it really was painted in Italy, probably by some young art-student, for in the corner you'll find a signature which I think is genuine.'

"I looked, and saw in small red letters the words *Fazzone-Venezia*.

"I put it down and thought no more of it. A week later, passing the shop, I thought I would look at it again, but it was gone. I was rather sorry then that I had not bought it for the sake of the curious resemblance to Margaret. But the whole affair went out of my mind, and from that day to this I had forgotten it."

"And now?" I cried excitedly.

"Well, now of course I see that if it really was a portrait of Margaret it is of the highest significance. Of course I may be mistaken in thinking it her portrait. Accidental resemblances are not uncommon: I myself have known an auctioneer who bore so close a likeness to a famous politician that more than once he received ovations meant for his prototype. But if it was Margaret's portrait—I dare not put it more

confidently—then it proves that she was alive five or six years after parting from me in London, and that she had been living in Venice at that date.”

“Why five or six years?”

“Allowing for the age of the picture. The paint was quite fresh. It was certainly not more than two years old.”

Here was a discovery indeed, and, as the whole situation arranged itself rapidly in my mind, I saw one thing quite clearly—we must try to find Margaret Overberg. The clue we had was no doubt slight enough. It amounted at the most to a presumption that she was alive and in Venice five or six years after leaving her husband. Supposing that was true, we had at least a point from which to begin our search.

Mr. Heron read my thoughts, and said: “Remember, I told you not to attach too much importance to this supposed portrait. I may have been quite mistaken.”

“I don’t think you were, and I don’t think you think so,” I replied.

“Well, honestly, I don’t think I was,” he answered gravely.

“Ought we not to search for her then?”

He rose from his chair and walked up and down the room in manifest agitation.

“I don’t know,” he said presently. “We don’t know what we may find. A lonely woman, without friends or human ties, wandering about Europe in bitterness of spirit, is capable of strange actions. Who knows what she may have done in those long wanderings? Who knows what may have happened to her?”

His words startled and impressed me. I caught a glimpse of his unuttered fear. But stronger than fear

was the sense I had that neither for him nor me could there be peace of mind till we knew the worst or best. And somehow I believed it was not the worst that we should find. The impression I had gathered of Lucille's mother was of a strong and self-reliant woman, not easily betrayed into weakness. She had had the strength of mind to leave her husband; wherever she went that same strength of mind would be her protection. And if the reason of that separation was what we supposed it, she was triply armed by her remorse against the follies that allure the lonely exile in Europe. I could conceive her life as beating itself out in misery and solitude among the impoverished garrets of European capitals; I could conceive a lonely grave among an alien people; but the one thing I could not imagine was that this proud and sad nature should ever stoop to the tyranny of an unworthy passion.

"I'm not afraid that we shall find anything worse than sorrow and remorse," I said. "My chief doubt is whether we can find her at all."

"O, that is the least part of the problem," he replied. "It is not so easy as some people imagine for a man or woman who wishes to disappear from society to do so. They always leave trails. There's no part of the earth to-day that is not linked to every other part. I have known men who have run away from London to Africa or Canada, and the first face they saw on the wharf at Quebec or Cape Town was the face of their next-door neighbour."

"Then you think it would be easy to find her?"

"Not easy, but certainly not as difficult as it looks. The difficult thing is to get your first clue; after that you have only to follow it. Now suppose I am right about the portrait. We know then that Margaret was in Venice in a certain year. We know the name of

the artist who painted the portrait. With that knowledge it should not be difficult to discover where she lived, when she left Venice, where she went to. Carry out the same process in other cities, to which she may have gone, and sooner or later you reach your final facts."

"Mr. Heron, will you do this?"

He gave me a searching glance, and said, "Do you really wish it?"

"I do," I replied.

"Very well, then. We will do it—but——"

"But what?"

"I am still a little afraid of interfering with the work of the gods. The Fates wove the mesh years ago and finished it—they may be angry with the mortal who unravels it."

"I am not afraid," I said with a foolish impetuosity.

"No, my dear boy, you are young, and I am old. There's a great difference."

"Forgive me. I didn't mean that."

"There's nothing to forgive—something rather for which I am your debtor—the hope that belongs to your youth, of which I feel the contagion. And so there's one thing more I have to say. If I go on this adventure, you must go with me. I shall need you."

"I am most willing, and most grateful."

"Very well then. A week will serve to put my affairs in order. Let us agree, then—a week to-day we start for Venice."

CHAPTER XXVI

VENICE

BEFORE I left London, I gave my Aunt my full confidence on the position of my affairs. This I did with the consent of Mr. Heron, who had formed a high idea of my Aunt's wisdom and judgment. Mr. Heron invited her to Callipash Street, to the great indignation of William, who regarded all women with profound distrust.

"They're none of 'em no better nor Eve, an' she were a bad 'un," he declared. "There ain't no woman ever been here in my time, an' it's agin' the rules of the 'ouse."

He was a little mollified when he found that my Aunt was beyond the most mischievous age of woman, although he was unwilling to admit that there was any age when woman was not a peril, a nuisance, and a threat to masculine contentment.

"You can't never trust 'em," he remarked, "an' the older they is the worse they do get. They be like apples, which are sour when they're young an' rotten when they're old. Wimmen was ordained for the affliction of men, an' as sich is to be shunned by the wise. But Mr. Heron, 'e ain't wise no more. He be like Solomon, which in 'is old age fell into vanity all along o' wimmen."

However, my Aunt came to Callipash Street and so overawed William by her masculine manners that that redoubtable misogynist completely succumbed, in spite of the threat he had made to contest her en-

trance foot by foot with the aid of brooms and pokers.

"Now, my man, don't stand there gaping at me like a stuck pig," she exclaimed. "I'm not going to eat you, and, from the looks of you, should be very sorry to try."

"We ain't used to wimmen in this 'ere 'ouse," said William weakly.

"You needn't tell me that. Any one can see it," she retorted. "You've lost the third button off your coat, and there's a hole in the heel of your sock. I'll warrant you never knew it, either. Men never do see things like that, and that's why they want women to look after them."

"You're a very imperent person," said William indignantly.

"Not at all, William. I'm only a person accustomed to tell the truth. But there, it's much the same thing, I suppose."

"And now," she said, turning to me, "show me some place where I can sit down—if William doesn't object."

She did not listen to my story as sympathetically as I could have wished: indeed, at the mention of Lucille's name, she showed a distinct tendency to snort.

"That little chit you used to go to see in the days when you wore white cotton gloves, eh? Well, you began early, I'll say that for you."

"Why, one might think you didn't like her, Aunt."

"Of course I don't like her. I don't like any one who is likely to take you away from me."

"You don't mean to say you're jealous, Aunt?"

"Yes, I am, and I'm not ashamed to say so. I suppose you think that because I'm an old woman that's ridiculous? Well, if you knew more about women, you'd know that no woman is ever too old

to be jealous. I hate the thought of any one coming between you and me."

"Why, Aunt, dear——"

"O, yes. I know what you're going to say, and you needn't say it."

And to my surprise tears filled her eyes, so that I really began to feel that I must be treating her badly, and in some way or other had put myself in the wrong. However, when I had made the most earnest protestations of my affection for her, she soon recovered her spirits, and remarked that no doubt she was an old fool, and that an old Aunt who had never been more than moderately good-looking, couldn't be expected to count for much, anyway. As this humble estimate of her own charms called forth eager contradictions on my part, she repeated it in order to be contradicted; and kept up this combat for several minutes, till it ended in laughter on both sides; from which it will be seen that, in spite of her masculine propensities, my Aunt was very much of a woman after all.

On a former occasion my Aunt had told me that it was part of a young man's business to fall in love, so that this outburst of feeling on her part surprised me. The explanation I now saw was that on that occasion she spoke as a theorist. She had attached no importance to my romantic love for Lucille, supposing it to be no more than a boy's fancy. The case, as it was now presented to her mind, was wholly different. I was about to leave England on a quest that was imposed upon me by my love of Lucille. My life was being shaped and altered by my love, and the first result of this reshaping was that I must be parted from my Aunt for an indefinite period. This was a cruel blow to her. But having once received its full impact, and relieved her feelings, her

old half-bitter, half-humorous stoicism soon reasserted itself.

"It's a thousand pities you should leave just now, when things are opening so brightly for you here," she remarked, "but that's the kind of trick life usually plays us. I see you are resolved to go, and I can't say that I think you shouldn't. Only, my dear, remember I'm growing old, and come back as soon as you can. Time to you seems an inexhaustible purse—you can spend freely because so much is left. My purse is getting to the bottom—my little treasure of Time will soon be exhausted."

Mr. Heron came in at this point, and it became necessary to go over all our plans and arrangements. My Aunt insisted, against Mr. Heron's strong protest, on furnishing me with a large sum of money for my expenses. "He's my nephew, he's only your secretary," was her argument. We were to start in three days' time. At last the morning came—a typical London morning, of weak sunlight and lavender-coloured mist; the old grey buildings delicately veiled, a church spire here and there golden-topped with upper light, the trees in the park motionless and shrouded, like watchers on a river-bank. Victoria Station was like a vast cave peopled by pigmies. There came a whistle; a plume of steam rose white into the grey void; the wheels began to turn, and in another moment London began to glide past, to disappear behind us. Broad meadows, bathed in sunlight, rushed upon us, held us for a moment, and also disappeared. We passed a school, with files of children in a playground; a cemetery with women planting flowers on quiet graves; a church whose bell rang sweetly over clustered red-roofed cottages. England called to us from thorp and village—immemorial England, the patient mother, who had seen so

many of her children pass by the same road, and had not had power to stay them. My own small errands were forgotten. I was leaving England; immemorial England, from whose dust my flesh was fashioned, at whose mighty breast I had been nourished. A thrilled sense of release, of adventure, held me silent; and I was still silent when the first glimpse of a level plain of water and a white ship proclaimed the sea.

Too many persons have exhausted all the ingenuities of language on Venice to leave much opportunity for a late comer like myself, even if I had the means or desire to avail myself of it. One impression, however, I may record, chiefly because I do not recollect that any other writer has recorded it: viz., the sense of secrecy which met me everywhere. Venice struck me as a hidden city, whose beauty existed for itself and was not meant to be shared, whose solitude was as purposed and complete as Tadmor in the wilderness. It was a fugitive city, asking only to be let alone, to be forgotten, to be allowed to shape itself as it pleased, irrespective of ordinary laws and customs. From the first moment when I saw its white houses floating on the wide waters of the still lagoons like white water-lilies, I caught the impression of some deliberate attempt to avoid scrutiny by complete harmony with environment, much as birds and wild animals take colour from earth and forests as a method of defence. It wished to elude the eye as they do; it was not as other cities that thrust themselves upon the gaze, and challenge love or hate with a superb effrontery. And the same impression followed me day by day among its intricate canals, so silent, so mysterious, so furtive: waters of profound secrecy, flowing past closed doors, behind which tragic Drama crouched, wordless and stealthy. Beauty was there indeed, a marvel of colour and arrangement, an

amazing magic—but all this appeared accidental: it had happened so, but the thing really planned was secrecy. Its very quiet was contagious. I found myself speaking in a hushed voice, almost whispering. The dark cloaked figures as they moved about went on tiptoe, finger on lip, sandalled in silence. And to come here from London, from the roar and clash of multitudes in infinite collision of mind and purpose, was to suffer rebuke, to be humiliated with a sense of coarse intrusion and of blundering manners.

That Margaret Overberg should take refuge in Venice seemed not only likely but inevitable. It was a city that had done with the world, and it was the natural refuge of those who had done with the world. I pictured to myself a broken gambler facing the austere dawn: Venice was like that. She had once played for high stakes of empire, had lost and had gone back to her brooding silence. Margaret had done the same thing. She had left the great gaming-table of life, bankrupt and disgraced. Where could she hide so well her proud sorrow as in this city, itself a city of proud sorrow? Here, at least, there would be sympathy—the sympathy of common memory. And more than sympathy: the stoical disdain, the unsubdued dignity that puts the past, with all its pain, behind it as a trifle, and resumes its dream. I could hear Venice whispering to herself amid her silent waters that nothing really mattered, neither victory nor defeat; and I could hear Margaret, too, repeating the same litany, in solitary voyages to the Lido or Torcello.

We had very little luck at first in following those clues that seemed so obvious when we talked of them in London. We did indeed discover that there had been a young artist named Fazzone, who was recognised in a narrow art circle as a promising portrait

painter. He had lived in Venice until recently—we found his studio, a bare narrow room in a *corte*, or blind alley, near San Rocco. It appeared that he had left for Rome months ago.

Later on, we became acquainted with a clergyman who had resided many years in Venice. Dr. Gilbertson was well acquainted with the English colony, and made it part of his business to be of service to his countrymen who were more than transient visitors to the city. He was a de-nationalised Scot, keen-eyed and shrewd, who gave the impression of being the kind of man who would be trusted with many secrets, and would guard them jealously. He met our enquiries with a cautious reticence.

"Yes, he had known many thousands of comers and goers in Venice, and he had a singularly good memory for names and faces. But a great many English folk came to Venice who had good reasons for concealment—not unlawful reasons—not that—but reasons of a personal nature, some of which were confided to him, of course. Any such confidences he considered sacred."

Mr. Heron told him as much of Margaret's history as might be safely revealed, and Dr. Gilbertson followed it with critical attention.

"I'm afraid I can't help you much," he said at length. "I have certainly never met any one who gave the name of Margaret Overberg—but that counts for little, because people who wish to be lost to the world seldom use their own names. I do remember, however, a lady who answers somewhat to your description. Fazzone may very possibly have painted her. At one time Fazzone had quite a small vogue with English visitors. If my guess is right, this lady lived for two or three years at the Grand Hotel. You had better enquire there. Come back to me later on,

if you like, and if I can help you I'll be glad to do so."

At the Grand Hotel we came upon our first direct evidence. The manager permitted us to examine the address-book of the hotel, and there, at a date of six years earlier, we found the name *Margaret Smith*. Mr. Heron at once recognised the hand-writing. But beyond that there was little else discoverable. The manager professed to recollect her; perhaps he did so, but he was unable to describe her. He remembered, however, that she lived a good deal in her rooms, and made no friends. Latterly she had found the Venetian winter trying, and had given that as her reason for leaving. Was she an invalid? He would not say that, but he seemed to remember that she was not very strong. He had an impression that when she left she went south, perhaps to Rome or Naples; that was the usual thing with people who did not like the Venetian winter. Certainly she left no address. Few letters came to her, and none were forwarded.

The man was clearly honest, anxious to oblige, and ready even to stretch a point in order to gain our good-will. His suggestion that Margaret had gone south when she left Venice appeared reasonable, but it did not help us very much. If we were to find her, we needed more exact information than this, and none was forthcoming.

However, here was one thing proved—Margaret had been alive six years ago. And Mr. Overberg had remarried long before that!

As we came down the marble stairs of the Grand Hotel, and stepped into a gondola, this fact clashed upon the brain like a gong. We were half-way to the Lido when Mr. Heron said: "Robert, do you remember when Mr. Overberg married his present wife?"

"I don't. But it must have been when I was a little boy."

"And you're now twenty. That would make it twelve years ago at least. How do you account for it that Margaret was alive and in Venice only six years ago? He couldn't have divorced her—she couldn't have divorced him—these things can't be done secretly."

"I've thought of that, but I didn't like to suggest it."

"Well, God grant there may be some better explanation than now appears possible. But I am greatly troubled. I am tempted to give up the search for Margaret."

And for the next month the search was tacitly given up. Mr. Heron's words, spoken when we first talked of this journey, often came back to my mind: "I am a little afraid of interfering with the work of the gods. The Fates wove the mesh years ago and finished it—they may be angry with the mortal who unravels it." Might not this be the true wisdom, after all? Did not Time itself, by weakening the memory of all past events, put a seal upon them, and suggest the propriety, or at least the magnanimity, of silence? After all, if Margaret wished to obliterate herself, had she not the right to do so: had not every human creature the right of sanctuary?

Sometimes it seemed to me that the voice of Venice itself uttered this counsel. It came in the sound of lapping water on marble stairs, in soft winds rippling star-sown lagoons, in the general sense of much past evil, wrong and sorrow cheerfully forgotten, wisely buried out of sight. Ghosts enough were here, blood-boltered ghosts indeed, worse than Macbeth's queen ever saw, but who cared to raise them? Not the gondoliers eating their cheerful meal beneath the

Bridge of Sighs, not the gay singers who filled the Grand Canal at night with light and music, not Venice herself, serene and imperturbable, throned among her waters. She forgot the things that were behind, the old bitter tragedies and crimes, and stretched out eager hands toward each new dawn, with a childish joy in life—why could not we? After all, was there any finer wisdom than to forget the things that were behind, especially the sins and errors of other people?

There were times, too, when the overwhelming beauty of Venice itself so filled my mind that it seemed as though the sole end of life were beauty. I saw the great artists who had made the city glorious going about their work like men who saw visions and dreamed dreams, indifferent to the feuds of parties, the grimy conspiracies of politics, the sordid growth of commerce; equally indifferent to petty social decalogues, and to the common lust of self-advantage; absorbed in their dream, enamoured of its beauty, inebriated with the ecstasy of art—and after all these were the only persons who were truly memorable, and remembered. "For this cause shall a man forsake father and mother, wife and children"—the solemn words applied to other things beside religion. Renunciation of ordinary forms of life to attain a higher type—this surely lay at the root of all great living. To create beauty—what greater thing could man do, and what mattered the price he paid for victory? That had been the spirit of these old artists, of all true artists, and an inner voice whispered to me that I was of their company. Must I also renounce? If so, what? Was it this dream of earthly love, with its trite end in marriage and a commonplace existence as householder and taxpayer?

There came to me strange extreme moods of exalta-

tion as I floated on the Grand Canal at night. The world I had lived in became unreal to me. It fell away from me, and sank out of sight. Its obligations were annulled. I could regard it without agitation, without interest, as something that did not concern me, and had never truly concerned me. It was not my business to delve into the mystery of the Witmarsh crime; my business was to assert my own soul. My spirit ached for freedom, some larger unimagined liberty, which I felt but could not formulate. Even Lucille was forgotten in these moods. I told myself, in the secret voice one uses who utters blasphemy, that I could do without her. There was nothing I could not do without if I might find out how to express the spirit of beauty.

Mr. Heron, I am confident, was affected by the same influence. For a month after our interview with the manager of the Grand Hotel the purpose that had brought us to Venice was never named. He spent his days in absorbed pilgrimages to old churches, hidden marvels of art and architecture, and the fury of the picture-hunter possessed him utterly. He had become younger; his eyes were bright with a new elation, and he moved briskly and joyously. After all the sad and bitter years, it was clear that he also had found emancipation, rejuvenation.

Had these moods continued, had nothing happened to disturb their spell, I think it likely we should have given up our quest. We should not have given it up by expressed agreement, but it would have been allowed to lapse. Mr. Heron would have turned his back on Callipash Street for good, would probably have settled down in Venice, and I should have lived there with him. But the day came when the mood was broken, and the blow came from Dr. Gilbertson.

During the weeks we had been in Venice we had

seen him from time to time, and had latterly gone often to his rooms which faced the Grand Canal. Mr. Heron had found him a congenial mind, for he was an expert on Venetian art and history. His rooms were not unlike Mr. Heron's in London, except that they were loftier, and possessed an exquisite painted ceiling by Tiepolo. In them he had accumulated hundreds of rare books, many fine specimens of Venetian bronze and ancient glass, and of course innumerable pictures. He was an indefatigable book-hunter, and, unlike most book-hunters, was as eager to buy modern books as ancient, if they possessed any real worth.

One night when we were in his rooms he asked us abruptly if we had ever been in Spain, or had thought of going there. Mr. Heron replied that to him, as to most Englishmen of that period, Spain was an unknown country.

"Yet," said Dr. Gilbertson, "one of the finest hand-books ever written is Ford's book on Spain, published by John Murray. It is more than a hand-book; it is a brilliant piece of work by a man of extraordinary knowledge and very caustic humour. I have been fortunate enough to pick up a copy of the 1857 edition—somewhat revised from the first edition, it is true, but with much additional matter."

He laid the two stumpy red-covered volumes on the table and continued: "I have a certain purpose in showing you these books. You will find a name written on the title-page which will interest you."

We looked at the title-page, and found the name Margaret, with an O, crossed out, and Smith written instead.

"Where did you find this?" asked Mr. Heron.

"On a bookstall at the corner of the Piazza. Persons leaving Venice often sell their books before

they go, and it must be owned Ford's two volumes are cumbersome for a traveller."

"There's no doubt this is Margaret's writing," said Mr. Heron.

"Well, I thought you would say so," said Gilbertson, "but that is not all. I want you to turn to page 260 of Part I. You will see that is a description of Ronda, and is much underscored by heavy pencillings. Now I don't want to raise false hopes, but I think we may fairly assume that Margaret Smith owned this book. She also scored these pages about Ronda. It is at least evident that she was attracted by Ford's description. The place interested her: it was in her mind. As a mere suggestion I offer this, that when she left Venice she was likely sooner or later to find her way to Ronda."

"Ronda, Ronda," exclaimed Mr. Heron. "Why, now I come to think of it she mentioned the place to me once. , 'Burgos, Toledo, Ronda—tired people could sleep there, for there no one was awake'—those were her words to me on the day when I saw her last."

"Well, that's rather an important corroboration of my theory," said Gilbertson. "I'm not at all an expert psychologist or anything of that kind, but I've known a great variety of persons in somewhat intimate relations, and I've noticed that the clue to certain actions which surprise us is often found in some obscure mental suggestion by which they themselves are not clearly conscious. It may be so here. Ronda makes an impression on the mind of your sister-in-law. She thinks of it as a place where she can sleep well because the whole place is asleep. Some day, or rather some night, when sleep won't come to her, and she is wrought into a condition of nervous agitation, she thinks of Ronda. She begins to wish for

it. There are no duties to prevent her going there, if she so desires. It attracts her more and more, and all at once she decides to leave Venice. If the impression made by Ronda lasts, sooner or later, as I said, she is likely to go there."

"It sounds very logical," said Mr. Heron.

"It does, but don't forget we make our worst mistakes by being merely logical. Nothing is apt to betray us more grievously than logic. You must know something of the emotional nature of your sister-in-law—you must judge how far impulse would guide her in any act. However, I have nothing more to say. I told you I would help you, if I could. I may be starting you off on a wild-goose chase. You must judge of that for yourself. But I think, if I were in your place, I would try Ronda."

Thus, for the second time, what appeared to be the hand of chance directed our course. A half-forgotten picture, the signature in a book—on such slight things do human actions turn. To those who see life only as a piece of carefully contrived mosaic, fitted by deliberate intention to its slightest detail, such interferences may appear incredible. The larger view of life acknowledges some other Power that compels the pattern in the mosaic. We not only work, but are worked upon; after all, it may be, we are but diligent artificers in the hands of a supreme artist.

Some men have a power of conveying conviction not so much by what they say, as by the total force of their personality. Dr. Gilbertson was such a man. I had an instinctive faith in his shrewdness, his clarity of judgment, his intuitive reading of character and motives. Mr. Heron felt in the same way about him. Neither of us ever met him again, but the impression he made in us remains, and his good cautious Scotch face, with its jutting grey eyebrows and keen kindly

eyes, is one of the most distinct of all the portraits in my gallery of memory.

"We must go to Ronda," said Mr. Heron quietly as we floated back down the moonlit waters of the Grand Canal.

We stood in silence on the dripping marble steps of the Grand Hotel, gazing on that magic picture of long-ranged palaces and shining towers and domes.

It was our farewell to Venice.

It was almost a relief from a beauty that was torturing when a dense black cloud rose across the moon, and stripped the city of its silver magic. It was easier so to part from her.

And the same thought was in the heart of each of us; after all there were duties, responsibilities, tragedies——

It was not so easy to renounce the Past.

CHAPTER XXVII

SENORA VALIENTES

THE events that happened at Ronda have left an ineffaceable impression on my mind. Much that occurred there was of a very intimate and sacred character, and of these things I can only speak with reticence. Of other happenings, which are essential to my story, I can speak more freely, yet not with entire freedom because they concern others beside myself.

We arrived at Ronda in the beginning of September. We might easily have arrived three weeks earlier, but Mr. Heron's manifest hesitation to unravel the last threads of mystery in relation to Margaret made our progress slow. We lingered here and there, at Pompeii, at Rome, at Naples, and should not have left Naples when we did but for the sudden increase of cholera in the city, and the chance of a boat sailing for Gibraltar. Thence we rode northward through a miracle of hill and forest scenery, till one evening, just as the sun was setting, we saw Ronda perched like an eagle's nest upon its shelf of rock, and climbed the narrow mule-track to the little city.

In Venice a solitary traveller may be lost: in Ronda he who would hide from observation seeks obscurity in vain. The population is small, compact, and clanish; the stranger is at once remarked, and his movements are followed with a kind of scornful curiosity. We knew that we were watched from the moment when we passed the old Moorish castle that guards

the town, and stood for a wondering half-hour on the wild bridge that spans the Tajo,—that vast dividing chasm which isolates the old town from the new. Sun-browned mountaineers, picturesque smugglers, bull-fighters, and women with the proud step of Arab horses, passed us with questing eyes, and we were attended on our parade by a little crowd of children, who plainly regarded us as novel and perhaps dangerous intruders.

Our landlord, a Gibraltar Spaniard, who spoke half-a-dozen languages with impartial inefficiency, himself remarked on this characteristic of Ronda. "Everybody knows everybody here," he observed, "and what they don't know they invent."

"Do many English people come here?" I asked.

"A good many. You see it's the healthiest place in Spain. People find it difficult to die here. They often live to be a hundred."

With such an opening for conversation it was not difficult to push our enquiry concerning Margaret.

"I have come here to visit a relation, an English lady," said Mr. Heron. "I am informed that she came here for her health some years ago, but I am not sure if she is still here."

"Ah, many English ladies come—they have, what you call it—the consumption, eh? Sometimes they die. It is verra sad."

"And sometimes recover?"

"Si dios quiere, Senor—as God wills."

He glanced at us thoughtfully, and continued, "There is a lady here now—maybe it is your friend. She live in a house outside the town, yes. She is ill, with what you call the consumption. I hear she will die."

We found the house next day. It was a white flat-roofed house, with a small patio, full of flowers, and

a tinkling fountain that fell into a yellow marble basin. It stood on the edge of the Tajo—the upper windows must have commanded a full view of the terrific gorge. A silent Spanish servant received us. She took our cards with a dull uncomprehending glance. A tall dark man, heavily cloaked, crossed the patio while we waited, and passed into the street. He was unmistakably a doctor. He walked a few yards down the street, turned, and came back to us, lifting his hat with a grand gesture.

"You seek the lady?" he said. "You are her friends—perhaps from England, eh?"

"We are from England," said Mr. Heron.

"It is well you have come. She will not live long, and she is alone. I have the honour to be her physician."

From him we learned that his patient had resided some time in Ronda—he did not know how long. It was only recently that he had attended her. She was very ill; she might last a month, it might be much less—it was *si dios quiere*. He was troubled because she had no friends. It was sad to be ill and without friends. We told him that we were stopping at the Posada del Tajo. He assumed our relation to his patient, and promised to let us know how she fared. With that he bade us farewell, with another grand gesture which would have seemed exaggerated in any but a Spaniard, and we went back to the town.

"And now," said Mr. Heron, "we can but wait. Margaret, if indeed it is she, has our cards. If she wishes to see us she will let us know."

"Did you observe the name by which the doctor called his patient?" I asked.

"Senora Valientes—yes. It would be like Margaret to use such a name—wouldn't it? Valiant, unsubduable—that is Margaret. Somehow that name makes

me sure it is she. It is so clearly an adopted name, and just the sort of name Margaret would adopt. Well, well, whoever it is dying in that silent house, may God help her, for she needs her courage, poor soul."

Three days passed without event. No word came from the silent house. We wandered about the old Moorish town, aimlessly, restlessly: afraid to go far, expecting every hour a summons which did not come. I came to know by rote the sights of Ronda, the Alameda with its unrivalled view of Cristobel, the simple houses with their doors of finely moulded walnut, the Moorish houses far below in the darkness of the gorge, above all the gorge itself, the Tajo, with the boiling Guadiaro; that profound depth, with its silver flash of waters, and the vultures sailing to and fro between its walls, the silent couriers of death. It was horribly depressing. Even from the keen mountain air and blinding sunlight I could derive no exhilaration. The Guadiaro, with its ceaseless tumult, so soon hushed into silence as it left the gorge, seemed typical of human life—of that life in the silent house upon the edge of the Tajo, which after all its vain dashing against the rocks of circumstance was sliding into peace. And the vultures—these foul creatures nourished on the carnage of the bull-ring, watching ceaselessly for the signals of decay and death—added a kind of horror to the scene. It was only when the rising moon filled the gorge with silver, and the tiny lights beside the Guadiaro sparkled like jewels, and the vultures had departed, that I caught the charm of Ronda, and knew what Margaret meant when she said that tired people could sleep here, for everything was asleep.

On the fourth day, soon after noon, Doctor Xavier appeared.

"I have come from my patient, Senora Valientes," he said gravely. "With your permission, we will take a walk toward the Tajo, where we can talk without the danger of being overheard."

We came to the great "cloud-suspended" bridge and halted there.

"And now," said the doctor, in a dry, formal manner, "it is my duty to give you some information, and, with your permission, to ask you certain questions. Perhaps you will allow me to explain that I am not unacquainted with your country—I spent two years in a London hospital—Guy's. I mention this because you will probably be more willing to talk freely with one who has a genuine admiration for your country than to one whom you regard as a total stranger. You have no doubt guessed that the name by which my patient calls herself is an assumed name. She came here two years ago, rented the house in which she lives, and has since led so retired a life that very few persons in Ronda have any acquaintance with her. I judge that she was ill when she came, or at least was upon the brink of illness. I was not sent for until about three months ago. It was then too late to do anything for her. For more than eighteen months she had been battling with her disease alone—refusing to admit its existence, in fact. It was in a sudden access of fear that she sent for me. She had come to realise her peril—alas, too late. Of your relations with her, I know nothing; it is upon that point that I must request information. She received your cards, and was greatly agitated—so much so that her life was threatened. It is my duty to preserve her from any excitement that may be fatal."

"Did she consent to see me?" asked Mr. Heron.

"She did not until this morning. This morning she expressed that wish. She was also good enough to in-

form me that her real name was Margaret Smith and that you were her brother-in-law."

Mr. Heron flushed deeply, and then turned pale.

The calm voice of the doctor went on: "Of course you ought to see her—it is both a right and a duty. But in view of her precarious condition I am entitled to ask whether your attitude to her is friendly or hostile? In the latter case it would be my duty to prevent your seeing her by every means in my power, because an interview of a hostile character would most certainly hasten her death."

"Dr. Xavier," said Mr. Heron in a trembling voice, "believe me, my attitude is friendly. I can say from the bottom of my heart that I have no feelings but those of deep pity and sympathy for your unhappy patient."

He stretched out his hand, and the doctor grasped it firmly.

"I hoped you would say that—I believed you would. Then we will regard it as settled that you see your sister-in-law as soon as possible—to-morrow in all probability. Will you permit me to make the arrangements for your interview?"

"I shall be happy to leave everything in your hands, Doctor."

We turned back to the town, and on the way the doctor gave us some further information concerning Margaret. He described her as still beautiful, but much wasted. In her brighter moods he had found her brilliant and cynical, but these moods had become more and more infrequent with the progress of her disease. With her growing despair of recovery the need of some kind of faith had made itself felt.

"We all need faith at the last," said the doctor simply. "I have seen many people die, but always at the last, whatever the life has been, the soul needs

faith. It will not surprise you to hear that your friend has become a Catholic."

"I am very much surprised," said Mr. Heron.

"But why? It is the only religion here in Ronda. Much of the Catholic religion is foolish, much is wrong—I admit it. There is here in Ronda the Church of the Socorro, where a million days' indulgence can be bought. That is foolish, and it is also wrong, but behind it all is something sublime—the facts of God and of the soul and of eternity. I am but a poor Catholic myself. I learned in London many things that made the Catholic Church appear wrong and absurd. Nevertheless I shall turn to it when I come to die. I shall see its grandeur then—not its folly—the grandeur of the faith it represents."

"I think I understand," said Mr. Heron.

"And you will understand for your friend if you think of it. She is alone—dying; her pride is broken and her spirit is humbly crying for the great solace of faith. What matter through what form she finds it? And here, as I said, there is but one Church; she must turn to that or nowhere,—the cup out of which she drinks is as nothing, it is the draught which it contains."

The next morning Mr. Heron had his interview with Margaret. I was not present, and the following account of what passed I received from Mr. Heron.

"I found her very weak," he said, "lying on a couch beside a window which overlooked the Tajo. I cannot describe the feelings of consternation and pity which her appearance excited in me. She seemed to have shrunk—she looked like a young girl, except for her hair, which has become quite white. Her eyes alone remained unchanged; they had all the old proud fire—it was as though the flame of her indomitable spirit was concentrated in them. 'You find me much

altered, my friend,' was her greeting. 'You need not be afraid to remark it. I know very well that I am dying, and I shall be glad when the end comes. Between us there need be no pretences.'

"I was too moved to make reply. We gazed at each other silently, and in the silence the voice of the river, rushing on between its rocks hundreds of feet beneath her window, was like sorrow orchestrated. The sound filled the room—a poignant voice of things passing, of hopes, ambitions, memories all being swept away, never to return.

"She caught my thought.

"'I like to hear it,' she said. 'It soothes me. It sings me to sleep sometimes. It helps me to remember how many have passed out as I am doing. It is a kind of comfort to know you tread not a lonely but a thronged road. The first who trod it might complain; but I,—I only follow where millions have preceded me.'

"After a time she said, 'I think I know why you have sought me out. I have always expected it. And I think I am glad you have come. Now please tell me everything.'

"I told her, little by little, all the story as you and I know it.

"'I have been a very wicked woman,' she said when I had done. 'Yet there were some excuses or at least some explanations. My chief crime is that I let my sister suffer innocently. For this I cannot expect your forgiveness.'

"She then gave me a succinct account of her part in the Witmarsh crime. She had no sooner married Mr. Overberg than she discovered that he was practically bankrupt. He had a certain hold over her in his knowledge of her father's history, and he had a yet stronger hold in the genuineness of her love for

him. It was he who suggested the abstraction of the bank-paper from the mill. At first she recoiled in horror from the scheme; but as his embarrassments grew greater, and the idea lost its novelty through continual subtle suggestion, her sense of repugnance diminished. Suddenly it was made clear to her that her husband was threatened with more than financial embarrassment; he had used bank monies, and was liable to criminal proceedings. It was under the stress of this new situation that she first began to regard the robbing of the mill as feasible. She reasoned that it was not like robbing an individual—it was only an institution that would suffer. It was at this point she tried to bring her sister into the plot. Her sister absolutely refused; but out of her love for Margaret, and from long habits of implicit obedience to her stronger will, agreed to remain silent. This was Mrs. Heron's great mistake. She had suddenly loaded her conscience with a terrible remorse. She ought to have revealed the plot, and on the day she came to the mill she had come with the full intention of doing so. The robbery was carried on without her aid or cognisance. Up to that time it had never occurred to Margaret that her sister might be implicated. When Millicent was arrested her grief was overwhelming. Still she did not speak. She believed that Millicent's innocence would be amply proved. Then Millicent died, and a great horror fell on Margaret. She consented still to be silent for her husband's sake, and, besides, the worst had already happened. But she refused to remain with Mr. Overberg. She had some private means: these she took and went abroad. She never again communicated with her husband. She simply sank out of sight. No doubt he assumed her dead, and hence his second marriage.

“That must not be disturbed by any knowledge

you now have,' she said firmly. 'I insist on that. I have done harm enough, and I do not wish to add to it a great shame visited upon an unsuspecting woman. Besides I shall soon be gone, and it can make little difference whether he imagines that I died years ago or knows I died to-morrow. No moral difference, I mean: the legal difference would be immense, of course, and that I wish avoided.'

"It was a long confession, and while, more than once, she was visibly exhausted, yet it was spoken with an air of deliberate calm.

" 'I have tried to make my peace with God,' she said with a wan smile—and then with a touch of her old cynicism, 'with what success I don't know. It seems a harder thing to make my peace with you, and yet I hope it may not be impossible.'

"I assured her that I forgave her, and she said, 'I always hoped you would, but I did not dare to think you would. If I had been able to think *that* I should have sent for you long ago.—No, no—you must not kiss me—I am not worthy. I am like that woman in the Gospel—I am only fit to kiss your feet—and I would do that too if you would let me.'

"By this time I am not ashamed to say that I was weeping.

" 'There, there,' she said, laying a wasted hand on my head, 'don't cry, John. Life's such a little thing after all. We make mistakes, we try to atone, we go away—and some day perhaps we shall meet again and make no mistakes.'

"The song of the Guadiaro once more filled the room. She noticed it and said, 'My life is nearly through the dark gorge now, and beyond it is a very peaceful land. That's why I love Ronda, why I've remained here so long—the Tajo is a sort of emblem of my life.'

"She seemed to brighten a good deal after her confession. Her cheeks were full of clear colour and her eyes smiled.

"Presently she said, 'You have some one travelling with you, a friend, I suppose. I have his card, but I don't know his name. Who is he?'

"'He is your daughter's lover,' I replied.

"'What, Lucille, little Lucille with a lover! It makes me feel very old to think of that.'

"I told her all about you, and she said, 'I must see him. I should like to see him.'

"Her brightness disappeared at the mention of Lucille's name and her eyes filled with tears.

"'That has been a constant sorrow,' she said, 'to have lost my child. She was so dear and so lovely; for months after leaving Barton I used to dream of her every night. Sometimes I made believe she lay beside me in bed, with her little body close to mine. I used to dream of her playing with her dolls in the nursery or talking to the flowers in the garden. She had a way of talking to the flowers as if they understood her.—She lisped when she talked—O, how clearly it all came back to me night by night, her adorable sweet ways, her little lisping voice always asking questions. She was asleep when I left her—the rain beat on the window that morning.—I stooped over her and kissed her, and her arms went about my neck instinctively, but she did not wake. And I have wondered, O, so often, how she grew up in that lonely house, and whether she missed me much.—I have always kept her birthday. I used to put a chair for her, at the table on that day, and pretend she was there. Sometimes I thought I saw her, a delicate little presence.—She had fair hair. Whenever I saw golden-haired angels in the pictures I thought of her. You must think me very heartless to have left her; perhaps she

thinks so too. But I had to do it—I wanted her to know nothing of all this sadness and folly, and if I had taken her with me she would have known sooner or later. Ah, if I could see her again—I think it would be easier to die.’

“She spoke in this heart-breaking way for some time, recalling all sorts of little things about Lucille—the child’s wise, surprising sayings, the way she talked and played, the love-words she used to her dolls, her tempers and repentances, her outbursts of affection and her prayers at night beside her bed. She showed me the only picture she had of her—a tiny water-colour done by some local artist when she was an infant. ‘If I could only see her,’ was her reiterated cry—and then, ‘Well, I must see her lover. He at least can tell me what she is like. You must bring him with you to-morrow. And now, my friend, you must go. I am very tired, and must try to sleep.’

“I came out into the patio, and found Dr. Xavier there, standing by the marble fountain.

“‘You have been with her a long time,’ he said. ‘I hope you have left her happier.’

“I replied that I thought I had, and added that it was difficult to think her near death, so vivid was the sense of the clearness of her mind.

“‘Nevertheless,’ he said gravely, ‘the body is exhausted. The mind will control the body as long as there is anything left to control. The final surrender will come suddenly—when I cannot prophesy—it may be to-morrow, it may not happen for a month. And she has a powerful will—that helps her. After all, there is truth in the old wise saying that man dies not wholly till the will dies. It might help her to live a little longer if there were anything she wished to live for, any object on which she set her heart, I mean.’

“‘There is such an object,’ I replied, ‘but I fear that

it is unattainable. The thing she desires most on earth is to see her child before she dies.'

"Well, what is the obstacle? Cannot she be sent for?"

"I fear not. I believe she is travelling somewhere in Europe."

"Well, think it over. You have found the mother; it should be a much easier thing to find her child."

This was Mr. Heron's story, told to me that afternoon as we sat together on the Alameda. It was profoundly touching, and it moved me deeply. Up to that hour I had been conscious of violent ill-will to Margaret. I had conceived her as a heartless plotter, the author of great wrong, and as a loveless mother. And now between her and me stood the shadow of death, and I saw her transfigured. We had come to the long desired hour of reparation, of justice, possibly of revenge; and had found a dying woman who disarmed us by her sufferings. She had done more than disarm me; she had enlisted me on her side. I saw the tragedy of her long expiation, her years of loneliness, her agonised and futile longings for her child. And the thought took possession of me that it might not be impossible to bring Lucille to the bedside of her mother. It would no doubt mean that Lucille would learn the truth, the dreadful truth about her mother. But we must take that risk. We had learned the truth, and with it pity. Might not Lucille feel the same, and find not indeed shame removed, as she had hoped, but shame forgiven in a new sentiment of profound love and sympathy?

Senora Valientes—the proud, embattled spirit, the strong woman standing unsubduable amid wrecked worlds of faith and love, had perished utterly. She was a dramatic fiction—no more. There had risen instead—Margaret—the woman who suffered; and I

remembered how often great poets had used that name to invoke the most gracious of all emotions, the forgiveness of wrong, the forgiveness that pardons all because it comprehends all.

"Mr. Heron," I said, "I know Lucille's address in London. She may be there; it is very likely that she is not. But we can wire her. A telegram may follow her and reach her somewhere. Shall we try?"

"By all means," said Mr. Heron. "We can but fail, and if we succeed we shall have done a pious act. A dying wish is a command."

So that night the telegram was sent to London, with small hopefulness on my part, and yet with a kind of faith that the unseen Power which had directed our actions so far might approve of this action too, and contrive its fulfilment. "The fates wove the mesh years ago and finished it," Mr. Heron had said; might there not be yet one golden thread lacking before the fabric was complete? Was it for this that death waited, with his hand upon the loom?

The sound of the weaving was low—the weary shuttles moved slowly—but they must not cease till into the stained warp and woof of Margaret's life was woven this last golden thread of reconciliation.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE HOUSE ABOVE THE TAJO

I SAW Lucille's mother the next afternoon. She lay, as Mr. Heron had described her, upon her couch beside the window overlooking the Tajo. Her white hair and flushed cheeks suggested a rose half buried in snow. She bade me sit beside her, and for some minutes looked at me in silence.

"And so you love Lucille," she said at last. "I find it hard to grasp the fact. I have only thought of Lucille as a child. Tell me about her."

I told her about our meeting in the Abbey, but she interrupted me and said: "No, I can't picture that. Tell me about Barton."

Some good instinct moved me to tell her about the famous fight, and Lucille's indignant intervention, and the tryst under the old Town-hall.

"Ah," she said, "I can picture that. That is so like Lucille. She had her little furies when she was only an infant, and her teasing ways—she would pretend she disliked my kisses, only to provoke more kisses—I used to wonder so how she would grow up.—Sometimes I've pictured her as a little Joan of Arc—and sometimes as an innocent coquette—a light-footed Ariel, drawing men after her. From your account she is a little of each.—And Barton, Barton, I can't tell you how much I've thought about Barton. It's strange, because I didn't love it, or even like it. It wasn't beautiful, and I've seen all sorts of places that are famous for their beauty. Yet there's some-

thing about it—the cool briskness of the air, the lime-trees at the end of High Street and the bees humming in them on June days, and the old church, and the bells, and the graves—often when I wake, I lie with closed eyes, and try to think the cool air blowing in the windows comes from the Barton meadows, and I think how I would like to hear a lark sing again. It's England—that's the secret, I suppose. You can't get rid of England by leaving it, I find. It's in your bones, in your blood. Your very flesh cries out for England if it has been fashioned out of English earth. It's a kind of magic. Barton, Barton!—It's quite commonplace—I know it. And yet it isn't. It's magical—and it draws me—it's England drawing me,—all that's old and revered and secure, such deliberate certainty, such deep peacefulness."

She spoke with an emotion that surprised me, and I could find nothing better to say than that I had found Barton very dull.

"Ah, you're not an exile," she said. "It's not until you're an exile that you begin to understand what you've lost. I didn't understand at first. I left England, hating it for all the sorrow and the misery it had brought me. And then one day I saw a ship at Venice with the English flag flying, and it all came back to me with a rush—the green tumbling seas in the Channel, and the white cliffs of Dover, and the larks singing over them, and even Barton—and I felt like a child at school who sees her mother coming towards her, and wants to run and hide her face against her mother's bosom. We may have many friends, you know, but only one mother. She's our own, however many friends we have—we're made out of her, we're her flesh and blood, and all the others are but make-believes."

"It's strange to hear you use that phrase—that's

Lucille's word for her step-mother. She used to call her her make-believe mother."

"Did she? And how did she speak of me?"

"As her mother who went away."

"Did she miss me?"

"Undoubtedly. She often talked of you. I remember her telling me with great seriousness that only mothers who '*born*' you are real mothers. The others only pretend."

"Do you think the other—the make-believe mother—treated her kindly?"

"I am sure she did."

"But kindness isn't love, is it?"

She took from her bosom the little water-colour of Lucille as an infant, of which Mr. Heron had spoken.

It was a miniature in a narrow gold frame, with a spring at the back. She pressed the spring, and drew forth a curl of fine hair. Through all her wanderings this had travelled with her; she had doubtless slept with it beneath her pillow, and I imagined how often amid those temptations of a lonely life of which Mr. Heron had once spoken this had been her sacred talisman.

"I cut that curl from her head that morning when I left her," she said. "I wonder if her hair is the same colour still."

"The same, but brighter."

"Ah, perhaps we shall be like that when we are dead, don't you think—the same but brighter. I sometimes wonder when I wake up on the other side of death—if I do wake up—whether my hair will be white. It would be worth while to die, if we could wake up young again."

"Dear Mrs. Overberg, please don't talk of dying," I remonstrated.

"Why not? I've learned not to fear death—almost indeed to desire it. Not that I'm at all sure of waking up, in spite of all that these good priests tell me. But it doesn't seem to matter very much whether you wake or sleep. The great thing is to make an end of living, when life has been like mine."

I could offer no consolation, and for the first time I realised how far I had departed from my mother's simple faith. The sound of the Guadiaro, filling the room, set me thinking of the innumerable lives that had passed away since first the waters clove their channel through the narrow gorge—Moor and Jew and Spaniard, and long before them primeval men who dwelt in caves beside the river. Did each of these expect to wake again, or were they merely glad that life was done? Priestly men had no doubt closed their eyes, too, and whispered at the porches of the brain some crude hope of waking hereafter. Yet they had gone, and were remembered no more forever. That all these should live again, that there should be room for them, or any need that justified their living—how sublime, but how pathetic the absurdity!

And yet there was a need—Lucille would always need her mother, here or hereafter, and her mother would need her. And there were long arrears of affection to be made up. The debt of love was unpaid. Blessed be the voice, true or false, that could speak with serene assurance to the dying, declaring that what life missed was not wholly lost, that it would be recovered somewhere, some time. I ceased to wonder that Lucille's mother had become a Catholic.

She put away, as with a sudden effort, these solemn thoughts, and began to talk in calm even tones about myself.

"I have almost forgotten you," she said, "in thinking of Lucille. Now tell me all about yourself."

I told her my brief story.

"So you didn't want to be a clergyman. Well, I'm not surprised at that. You don't look the part," she said with a smile.

Concerning my literary ambitions she remarked: "I've been a great reader, partly because for long years I've had nothing else to do. I may say with St. Beuve, 'My soul has lived among the masterpieces.' Well, do you know what I have discovered? That great books mean more than great talents. They mean great living, great souls. I can see you have the talents—you are clever. But you haven't found your soul yet."

"Lucille will help me to discover it."

"How like a man!" she smiled back. "You must shift your burden to a woman. And a woman must be content to develop your soul! Doesn't it strike you that Lucille may want to develop her own soul? I think that is what women will demand more and more in the years that are coming. They won't be content to merge themselves cheerfully in men, as they have done. And therefore I say, don't depend on Lucille, don't depend on anybody. You must work out your own redemption. No one can do it for you. Some day, it may be, you will realise your ambition, and will write a great book. But it won't be till you've become a great man."

She stretched out her hand and touched my face softly.

"You've got a good face, my dear boy. I think I can trust you."

She kissed my forehead, and said: "Now you must go. But come again to-morrow. I must see all I can of you, for the time is short."

The days passed with little change. Sometimes she seemed a trifle weaker, and sometimes so bright in spirits that it was impossible to believe her condition serious. I saw her every day, and the first emotion of pity I had felt rapidly ripened into love. She kept the miniature of Lucille always beside her now. She liked me to read to her, and said mockingly that it was clear I never could have been a clergyman—I read too well. She loved poetry, and it was curious to note her preferences. Tennyson—then at the height of his vogue—she would have none of: she said he had the soul of a virtuous spinster in a vicarage garden. Burns she loved because he had suffered: he was a genuine man, and sang with blood on his lips. Goethe she detested—he was a pedant, and the father of all German pedantry. Shakespeare, Isaiah, and the Book of Job had the firmest hold upon her mind; especially the last, of which she said all human life was in it, and the centuries had altered nothing.

“Only folk like me can understand Job and his friends,” she remarked. “They say boldly what we only think. They tell the truth about life. Job, cursing the day of his birth, is the greatest figure in literature. He speaks for the race. I’ve lost all, and I know he speaks for me.”

Mr. Heron was with us when this remark was made, and, as we walked home together, he said: “Robert, do you know I don’t think Margaret is so unhappy after all. She has got the range of Eternity, so to speak. She sees life in a big way. She sees her own sufferings in a big way, impersonally, as part of the vast human tragedy. The effect is to uplift her, to put her above suffering. Prometheus on his rock must have felt as she feels.”

But there were times, too, when she was no more

than mere woman, crying for her child, and protesting against the cruelty of death.

"Dying is so foolish," she said bitterly. "It takes you fifty years to learn how to live, and the moment you have acquired the art of living, you die. I can't understand a God who really cared for men being so wasteful of them. It's like a child throwing diamonds into a river because he doesn't understand their value."

And then she would break out into wild weeping for Lucille. Even if the good priests did tell the truth and she went to heaven, what would heaven be without Lucille? She wasn't wanted there, and she was wanted here. She was wise now; she knew how life should be lived; she could help Lucille so much; but she could not imagine herself as being of any use to any one in heaven. Her ideal of heaven was—Barton! Barton, in the springtime, with primroses and daisies, and the woods blue with wild hyacinths, and thrushes in the hedge-rows. She would give all the gorgeous flowers of Spain for an English daisy, and all the joys of heaven to walk through the dewy Barton meadows with Lucille at her side.

Her priest came to see her often. He was a grand-looking old man, simple as a child, with dark dream-filled eyes, a little dimmed with age. He had been a famous matador in his youth, but the death of a comrade in the bull-ring had altered all his thoughts, and driven him to the priesthood. He still had the virile poise of the athlete, and with it the composure of the saint. He was too used to the sight of death to fear it. One of his functions was to celebrate mass in the bull-ring, among kneeling matadors and picadores, who took the chance of death with the spirit of crusaders. In death the old man recognised

nothing more appalling than release, the great glad exit of the soul.

"There is something that holds her back from dying," he said solemnly one afternoon as he came away from Margaret's couch. "It is often so. The soul wants to go, but cannot. Do you know of anything on which her heart is set?"

Of course we told him of Lucille, and he replied: "No doubt that is it. She can't die till she has seen her child. Myself, I cannot understand this; but no doubt the Blessed Mother of our Lord can."

After the priest had visited her she was always quieter in mind, and inclined to talk about spiritual things. This she did with great simplicity, like a child who has discovered something wonderful, and wants to speak of it.

"I have never been a religious person," she said, "and am not now religious really. I have not the temperament. When I lived in England I found religion quite unattractive, because it had no warmth in it. It always seemed like something artificial, a veneer beneath which the natural grain of character was quite unchanged. Here it is altogether different. The Spaniard is inherently, and sometimes ferociously, religious. He is ready to die for his faith, and to make others die if they don't accept it. He's quite positive he's right, and because he is so positive he makes you think that perhaps he is right after all."

"Was it this note of certainty that attracted you to Catholicism?" I asked.

"Partly that—partly the fundamental common sense in Catholicism. It takes human nature as it finds it and makes the best of it. It doesn't try to make saints out of matadors and bandits—it knows that this is impossible. It says instead: 'Be as good

a matador as you can, and though you are a bandit try to be a gentleman. When you reach the end of things come to me, and I'll do my best for you.' Of all religions it's the most considerate of human weakness, and that's where it appeals to me. It's a motherly religion.—The Mother Church—isn't that a fine phrase? The Church that thrones the Mother—ah, how much that means! No other religion does that. I like to think of it as a great Mother, who opens her arms to every child of hers, however wrong, and asks no questions—just wipes his tears away, and says: 'Well, it's all right now.—Don't cry, you're in your mother's arms, and she'll never let you go.' ”

It was strange to hear one who was so proud by nature talking thus, but I think I understood and sympathised. It is those who by nature are most self-sufficient who are weakest when their self-sufficiency is broken. Pride never bends; it breaks. And this I was sure had been Margaret's case. The long solitude of her life, the proud isolation, had wrought a powerful revulsion; she wanted the Mother's arms all the more now because she had despised and done without them so long.

October had come, and no word had reached us from Lucille. My Aunt had wired us that the house in Vickers Street was still closed. We could only trust to the slender chance that Lucille might return to London before it was too late, or that she had left some address to which our telegrams might be forwarded.

In the meantime it was clear that the end of the long struggle in the white house above the Tajo was becoming imminent. There were days when we did not see Margaret at all; other days when we saw her for a few minutes only, and conversed in whispers. There were surprising rallies, too—sudden spurts of

the flame of life, when it burned with a brief extraordinary brilliancy. There was one day in particular when a soft warmth filled the air, and she insisted on being carried out into the patio, that she might once more see the flowers she had loved. Her voice, which for a week had sunk into the merest thread of sound, on that afternoon became full and resonant. She spoke of her years of travel, the scenes and places she had cared for most, with occasional humorous sketches of strange people and absurd dramas she had witnessed. A scene in Rome recurred to her. Wandering one afternoon in the narrow streets she had come upon an open bier with the body of a young girl lying on it, dressed in white. She had golden hair which fell around her shoulders, and her hands were humbly clasped upon a crucifix. The bearers carried the bier into a great solemn church, placed lighted candles round it, and left it there. Some one was playing the organ softly. The sun poured in through the painted windows, and scattered flowers of red and golden light upon the dead girl's breast. She did not look dead; the face had kept its contour and its colour—she was as one who slept. "That is what I would like for myself," she said wistfully. "Why do we make death so terrible? Why nail boards down over a face we loved? How much better to be carried through the open sunlight, with the soft air upon your face, to some quiet old church, with golden windows and an organ playing. There is nothing so atheistic as a coffin."

She had been reading a life of Catherine of Siena. "I don't like many of these Catholic saints," she said: "they posed too much. But I do like Catherine. She had no self-consciousness. She said and did beautiful things quite naturally. And I like her strength. She died of a tumor, you know, and when folk pitied

her she only smiled, and said, 'Yes, I have a gentle trouble in my side.' I like that—nothing braver was ever said or done."

"You have been very brave, too," said Mr. Heron.

"Ah," she replied, "but my courage is of a different quality. Mine is stubbornness. Catherine's was submission."

She spoke of her sister—it was the only time I heard her mention her.

"Millicent had all Catherine's sweetness, and some of her strength, too. I behaved very badly to her, but I think she has forgiven me. She has been so long in heaven she will have quite outgrown me. She will be the elder sister now, and I the younger—the last will be first, and the first last. I dreamed of her last night. She came to me, carrying her heart in her hands, and showed me the scar of a great wound upon it, and said, 'But it is quite healed now, you see.' And we went away, hand in hand, just as we did as children long ago in Epping Forest, and found such wonderful flowers—golden flowers that sang to us. O, it was very marvellous and sweet."

The soft evening breeze began to blow, and she said: "I have enjoyed this so much. I have made a great mistake in living in my room so long. I feel so much better out of doors. To-morrow you must bring me here again. I feel as if I shall soon be quite well now."

But the next day broke with storm and wind, and she kept her room. She did not leave it again. She suffered no pain now. She complained only of being very tired, and she slept a good deal. From her sleep she would often wake suddenly with the name of Lucille upon her lips.

At last there came a day when Dr. Xavier called and said: "You had better come with me. Her con-

dition is so precarious that it seems advisable to administer Extreme Unction without delay."

We came to the house and found the priest already there. He wore a white surplice with a purple shoulder covering, and had already made his preparations for the last solemn rite.

Beside the bed was a table, covered with a white cloth, a basin of holy water, and lighted candles. He sprinkled us with holy water, bade us kneel beside the bed, and began the ancient ceremonial, so familiar to him, so strange to me. Margaret lay in perfect stillness with clasped hands. He gently disunited them, and touched each palm with the holy oil, invoking forgiveness for any wrong they might have wrought. In turn he touched the eyes, the ears, the lips, the feet, with the same solemn prayer for pardon for the sins peculiar to each organ. "*Asperge me, Domine,*" he continually intoned in a rich deep voice.

Outside the door of the room half-a-dozen white-surpliced boys chanted the *Confiteor*, invoking the help of saints and angels to defend the passing soul in its perilous final journey.

"*Beatum Michaelum Archangelum*"—it seemed that all the heavenly host must assemble at that call. Death suddenly took on an extreme magnificence. The armies of heaven drew round the passing soul, marched with it, with flaming swords, and beat back the powers of darkness. The great Fisherman was there, and he who had fought the good fight—they upheld the soul with strong hands, lest it should stumble on the stones of fear. Assembled saints of every age watched the scene with sympathising eyes, chief among them he who built the structure of the Church's faith in Africa, and he who charmed Constantinople with his eloquence, and purged it by his

pity. Death ceased to be solitary. The death of the individual was linked with crowded forces, which had shaped the ages, and had lost nothing of their potency with time. And among them the individual soul moved, purged and safe, strong and triumphant, upheld by an immense tradition of faith and conquest.

It was profoundly impressive. It was as though the body and all its capacities of error were dismissed, as a thing temporary, frail, and insignificant. There remained only the Soul, the certainty of its survival, the sense of its unspent energy going on into new spheres and a new range of life.

Through all the solemn ceremony Margaret had not moved. She lay as calm and beautiful as that young girl whom she had seen carried through the streets of Rome on her open bier. Her lips smiled faintly, and her face was flushed. It was not until the last resonant challenge of the *Confiteor* died away that she opened her eyes. She uttered one word—Lucille.

Suddenly we became conscious of wheels in the street, and then of voices on the stair. The group of choir-boys at the door parted. There was a stir, a movement and a cry.

Margaret stretched out her hands toward the door. Upon her face a rapture grew. And then Lucille entered, and was in her mother's arms.

CHAPTER XXIX

LOVERS' MEETING

I STOOD upon the bridge at Ronda, waiting for Lucille.

A young moon hung like a curved lamp in the midmost of the gorge; the woods were ranged like veiled nuns, with bowed heads hushed in prayer; far below the river was like an organ playing in an empty church.

Five days had passed since Margaret's death, three days since her burial. I had seen Lucille as a figure in that tragic scene, separate and remote; but I had not dared to speak to her. And now she was coming to me; she had herself chosen this place and hour for our meeting.

Through the clear dusk I saw her coming, and my heart throbbed painfully.

She laid her hand upon my arm, and her eyes shone into mine. In the pale light her face had a solemn aspect, as if the witnessed majesty of death had moulded it into a strange new dignity. It was a new Lucille who stood beside me, a woman I had never seen before, and did not know. If I had imagined—and I had—that the old relations were unchanged, that I had but to pick up the threads of love where I had dropped them months before, I was completely undeceived. A great sorrow may purify or harden character, but one thing is certain, it never fails to create a new combination of qualities. A voice warned me that this new Lucille must be won

afresh; that any assumption of possession based upon the past would prove futile; that there was even a dire chance that she might not be won at all. I became painfully aware that I did not possess the key to her mind. I did not know what had passed between her and her mother in those final confidences on the brink of death. I felt awkward and restrained. A timidity, which I inwardly resented but could not overcome, possessed me.

I think she understood, and pitied me, and so her first words were meant to set me at ease. She thanked me for the telegrams I had sent her, and explained why they had been so long in reaching her.

"I got them in Paris," she said. "We had fortunately given the address at the Hotel Bristol, and there we found them. We had been in Switzerland all the summer, and we had arranged to stop in Paris for a week on the homeward journey. Miss Overberg was with me. At first she insisted that I should return to England with her; then that she should come to Spain with me. I resolved to come alone, and left the same night for Madrid."

"It must have been a tedious journey," I said, knowing how banal the words must sound.

"Not tedious, but terrible," she corrected. "Death travelled with me, and Fear—the fear that I should come too late."

"Thank God you were not," I replied fervently.

"Yes, I thank God, too. If I had been too late I think my heart would have broken."

Her voice trembled on the words, and she turned her face away. She was silent a long time, gazing down into the gorge and its rushing waters.

Then she began again in calm level tones:

"Tell me about my mother's illness—all that you know."

I told her how we had found her mother solitary in the white house above the Tajo; I described her bravery and her humility, those intimate confessions of her hopes and fears, those long conversations when her mind played so brilliantly on so many themes, the charm she exercised on me, the love I had come to feel for her—and I closed by saying, "Your mother was a very brilliant woman, Lucille."

"And again you use the wrong word," she said quietly. "My mother was a very good woman."

It was my turn to be silent now, and to gaze into shadows of the Tajo. "A very good woman"—my mind stupidly rehearsed the words, and I did not know whether I agreed with them or not.

Lucille read my thought, and said: "This is something that must be understood between us. I know all my mother's history—all, remember. May I tell you what I think about it? You have a certain right to know, I think."

I nodded my head.

"I suppose it depends a good deal how we regard sin," she said, "whether as error or deliberate baseness. I regard it as error, and error is something that can be corrected. Moreover, error may spring from generous motives as well as mean ones, and a generous error may be in God's sight a finer thing than a grudging rectitude."

"I can believe that," I said.

"Can you? Then listen. My mother erred through love, the love she bore my father. When women err it is almost always through love. Our Lord knew that, didn't He? He pardoned a woman's worst sin on one ground, that she loved much. My mother did a great wrong, but when you recollect her sin, remember this, she did not profit by it. She chose expiation, chose it deliberately. She became an exile,

almost an outcast. She doomed herself to death in life—her dying was an agony that lasted twenty years. She need not have done this. The law would never have found out her error. She was immune from the law. She might have argued, as many have done, that she was not the chief offender, that in time she could bring herself to forget her crime, and that there were strong social reasons why she should. Such thoughts may have whispered at her mind; they did not affect her, and she chose expiation. Remember, too, that she had had a miserable childhood. She had never known good people, and had never been guided by their standards. What was good in her was native to her; no one cared enough for her to sow the good seed in her heart. But there was a fineness in her, nevertheless. She turned instinctively to the fine things in art and literature—here too she had no instructor, she found them out for herself. When the moral crisis came she turned with the same sure instinct to the fine thing. She could not alter the dark facts, she could not in any real sense atone, but she could suffer, she could expiate—and this she did. And therefore I say of my mother that she was much more than a clever or a brilliant woman—she is in my eyes, and I believe she is in the eyes of the All-Merciful, a good woman.”

I was still silent, but now it was with astonishment. This Lucille, clothed in a dark flowing robe, her face clear and white as a cameo in the thin moonshine—this prophetic Lucille, dividing right and wrong with so sharp a sword, so calm, so assured—was this the gay and gracious Lucille I had known in London? Had I only known her grace, her form, her beauty—never her soul? Then I had seemed to tower above her: it was I who had experience of life, she was the novice. Now the positions were

reversed. She had outgrown me, outsoared me. She was stronger than I, and infinitely wiser. My thoughts raced after explanations, parallels.—A sudden picture held my mind of how Mary must have looked and spoken after the great Angel of the Annunciation had been with her—this new Mary, made awful by commerce with the Infinite, unrecognisable, moving before the humble kinsfolk with the glory of the stars around her brow, the depth of the heavens in her eyes.—Yes, that must be it. Lucille had met her Annunciation Angel and His name was Sorrow.

And that was not all. I found myself profoundly humbled. I had idealised myself as a kind of knight on a hard quest to deliver my lady from an unjust shame. Love for her had been my impulse, no doubt, but I saw now that vanity had been my spur. I had thought less of her deliverance than of the gratitude I should win from her by my achievement. Now I had come to my great hour, and two things stood distinct in a kind of blinding light. The one was that I had been so eager to win Lucille's approval that I had not so much as tried to be just to her mother. Her I had treated as a pawn in my game of love. That I had given her sympathy was nothing; I had not sought to give her justice. Secretly I had thought her shameful: I had not troubled myself to find out whether she really was so or not. Lucille had, and she had judged her noble. I might have reached the same verdict had I been less a lover of myself and more a lover of truth. For the second thing that shone clear was that Lucille who had been in dread of the truth all her life because she feared it would prove shameful, had found the truth, and recognised no shame in it. My long-purposed deliverance was not needed; she had won it for herself. She had

won it through that perfect clarity of vision which is the gift of simple hearts. She had seen at a glance what I had been too dull or too preoccupied to see, that the real secret of her mother's life was expiation. I ought to have seen that. It was for me to have come to Lucille with the atoning message. No doubt she had waited for it, expected it. O, I had come to my great hour indeed, and missed it after all.

"I learned to love your mother," I said humbly.

"I believe you did, and I am glad to think you did. She was very grateful to you, and in her last hours your name was on her lips. But love is a very vague word, isn't it? We use it to cover a great many emotions, and some of them not by any means the highest. The only true love, I think, is that which recognises something fine in the nature of another, something worshipful which humbles and uplifts the soul."

"Yes, that is true," I said eagerly. "O, Lucille, it is so I love you."

"I am not speaking of myself now," she said with a gentle smile. "I am speaking of one who cannot speak for herself. You had many days with her, I had but hours. Did you see the fineness in her? I came to her, as you did, blinded by many injurious conceptions. For many years I had supposed her divorced. No one had ever told me that, but both my father and my aunt had permitted me to think it. It was clear enough they wished me to forget her, and their silence meant that she was best forgotten. My father did more; he subtly encouraged the belief that she had wronged him. My childhood was saddened by these thoughts. My father knew this, but he did not care. It was essential to his self-esteem that he should pose as a victim and a martyr. Then I saw her, and in an instant I knew who was the

victim and the martyr. I had expected to find a proud hard woman; I found a mother with a broken heart. She herself had broken it in her thirst for expiation. She had laid cross after cross upon it, till the burden had become too great. Proud? O, yes, she was proud, but it was with the pride of the martyr who is resolved to drink the cup of sorrow to its last dregs without complaint. Think of this—try to measure what it means—she had been greatly wronged by my father, but she forgave him. A small-natured woman would have sought revenge. She would have said, 'At least he shall not marry again.' She allowed him to do even that. Do you think she was not jealous? All love is jealousy; it would not be love if it were not jealous. But she accepted this cross also as part of her penalty. She obliterated herself, and let him go his way unscathed. All these years there lay at her hand a weapon by which she could have struck him the deadliest blow. She scorned to use it. In her large magnanimity she let him alone. And it was more than magnanimity, it was submission to suffering as her appointed lot; and this submission was all the more wonderful because she was by nature proud, and had loved life with eagerness, and was free from the pressure of conventional opinion. O, Robert, it was this fineness in her that overwhelmed me. It broke me down utterly—and yet not by its marvel so much as by its awfulness.—It lay on me with a weight of adoration—something so thrilling, so solemnly beautiful, that my soul was prostrate before it."

She was weeping quietly. In the moonlight I could see the tears sparkling on her face.

"Dearest, don't cry," I whispered. "Can't I comfort you?"

"O, it's not comfort I need," she answered. "It's

something else. It's strength to do something that I find very difficult."

"What is that, Lucille?"

"Well, I meant this to be a sort of farewell meeting."

"I don't understand, dearest."

"Then let me explain. I shall never see my father again. I am quite alone in the world. It seems to me that I am left alone for some purpose. I don't quite know what I mean to do, or what I wish to do, but I've the feeling, and it is so strong in me, that I can't live the life of ordinary women. I am separated from them by memory and sorrow. If I were a Catholic I suppose I should take the veil."

"Then thank God you are not a Catholic," I cried.

"O, the name means nothing—there are ways of renunciation one can find without being a Catholic. Think of what I have learned of life in these last few days—greed and crime, injustice, blind punishment falling on the wrong person, missing the real criminal.—Life seems so horrible. It frightens me. I simply can't face it."

I began to see my way at last. It was revulsion against life that had caught Lucille in the whirl of its black maelstrom. Suddenly upon the brightness of her young life had descended this horror—this vision of the base things that hide behind life's sunlit illusion. She saw her father's perfidy, and all its bitter fruit, and had doubtless asked the question, "Was life all like this?" And beside this she had the vision of her mother's expiation, and because that seemed so divinely noble in comparison, she also thirsted for expiation. Her mother had renounced: was not renunciation her duty also?

"Lucille," I said, "don't you think expiation has

gone far enough? When you speak of renunciation, is not this what you really mean, that you want to go on expiating a sin that was not yours?"

"How could I accept happiness as my right when my mother had so little?"

"Your mother endured what she did for the one purpose only, that you might be happy. You speak of expiation: there's another word I would like you to think of—it is Ransom. All that she endured she meant to be the price paid for your freedom from suffering. She ransomed you, and I verily believe that if you refuse that ransom, and if in the place where she has gone the soul can still suffer, your refusal will crush her with a worse sorrow than any that she knew on earth."

She looked at me with startled eyes. I had a strong sense, and I think she had, that her mother's spirit was very near to us in that moment. Like a white patch upon the cliff we could see the house where she had died, and the white moonlight lay around us, and the gusts of soft air blowing up the gorge seemed like the passing of presences.

"I had not thought of that," she said simply.

"No, but that, nevertheless, was what your mother thought. I am sure of it. It was that thought alone which was the secret of her courage. She was ransoming you, and as each unhappy year closed she said, 'Lucille will be the richer and the happier for this.' Do you remember that miniature of you which she always kept beside her? It held a lock of your hair, cut off on the morning when she left you. She wore it over her heart. Doesn't that give you the clue to her deepest thought about you—the thought that all she did and suffered was for your sake? O, my dear, she wanted you to be happy; she lived wanting it, and she died wanting it."

"O, but it's life—life—it's so horrible. I've been behind the scenes, and I know!"

"No, it is not horrible, Lucille. It's like a great house with a ghost-chamber in it, and some day we see the ghost and are terrified. But wise men lock the door and don't go back. There are other rooms, with flowers and sunshine and bright fires. And there are hills, and rivers, and sweet sights, and little children, and people who have grown old loving one another, and quiet graves where they sleep hand in hand, and perhaps talk together in the dark. You've looked into the ghost-chamber, dear, and you were terrified. Lock the door, and come away."

"O, if I could!" she moaned. "But you don't know. You haven't seen the ghost."

"Yes, I have. It wasn't the same ghost you saw, but it was one quite as bad. We all see it at some time or other; it is called The Fear of Life. It hides in the dark corners of the world, and leaps out at us unawares. Some of us listen to its vile mouthings, and sit down and write foul books, and some of us go mad and commit suicide. Some of us ransack the world to discover excitements which will enable us to forget it, and some of us renounce the world, only to find the old grey Iniquity is all the closer to us because we are alone. But wise men simply lock the door upon it, and seek those other rooms to which it cannot come—the rooms where the fires are bright, and the little children play, and the wholesome sunshine pours in at open windows."

"Ah, but that does not get rid of it, it's there still, and you don't get rid of the ghost by pretending it doesn't exist."

"And so is Death here, but we go on living, and make our plans for life as if it didn't exist. Our very sanity depends on our forgetting. Look down the

Tajo, Lucille—think what multitudes of men and women have lived and died with the sound of the Guadiaro in their ears—all these fine, fresh bodies, so full of hope and beauty, now indistinguishable dust—all gone, youth and loveliness and grace, and high intentions—no, we dare not think of them. If we did we should go mad with the sense of the futility of living. So we turn away, and leave the dead to bury their dead, and claim our own right to live; and this knowledge that we ourselves must die, indisputable as it is, is not allowed to intrude upon our thoughts, so that the very last thing the healthy man thinks of is Death.”

“Yes,” she said doubtfully, “I see that that is true.”

“Well, it’s just the same with the Fear of Life, Lucille. We must forget that, too, if we would preserve our sanity.”

“But I can’t forget, O, I can’t.”

“You think so now, because you have seen the base things of life too closely. And because you are looking at them too closely you can’t see them in the right perspective. I don’t say they aren’t there. But there are other elements in life also, and if you will stand a little further back from the picture, you will recognise those other better elements. They are there too, remember; and they are just as real.”

“But what if I can’t see them?”

“Lucille, please don’t think me harsh or unsympathetic, but there is only one reply, *You can*. It depends upon your own will. No one can see a landscape on which he turns his back.”

The moon had risen into brightness; far-off Cristobel shone like a wedge of steel thrust up into a velvet sky: only the Tajo remained dark and full of gloom.

“Lucille,” I pleaded, “I think God has framed His special parable for us to-night. Here are you and

I gazing down into the Tajo, thinking of the broken centuries that lie there like huddled bones upon a battlefield—thinking of all the sad and bitter things in human life. And behind us the moon has risen over Cristobel. It shines upon a whole world of men and women who know how to accept thankfully the joy of the common day. They are plagued with no thoughts of the misery of life—not they. They've done their day's toil in olive groves and orchards, and forests; they've eaten their evening meal with thanks to God; they will sleep presently in each other's arms, with smiling lips. And there's a guitar sounding in the distance,—can't you hear it? It's a lover at the window of his future bride. Hear how the thin sound goes trembling off among the stars! Don't you think God loves to hear it? Chirping angels, I think, have no songs that will please Him better. Be sure of it, He approves a glad and grateful spirit in His creatures, and hides His face from those who refuse His gifts. Lucille, God is just waiting for you to turn round. His miracle is at your elbow, and you don't see it, because you gaze into the Tajo, and prefer its gloom to God's good moonlight. Lucille, dear, won't you turn round?"

"If I do, I shall turn my back upon the house yonder on the cliff, the house where she died," she said in a troubled voice.

"But you will not have lost it, dear. You will carry it in your heart. It will be a kind of hidden shrine before which you will often kneel. Your mother loved life with a great eagerness—you yourself said that a little while ago. Don't you think it will gladden her if you do so, too? O, I can think of her living again through you, and perhaps recapturing through your joyous use of life the joy she forfeited for your sake."

"She feared life, too."

"Yes, and for much deeper reasons than you have. But her joy in life was stronger than her fear, or she would never have lived through all those lonely years. She must have found something in life worth while, after all. She saw some good in it, and clung to that, and if she had her moments of deep sorrow she never let herself despair. And for you—can you doubt it?—there are a thousand things in life which make it worth while—things she never had, and to turn away from these in sad disdain is to be less than your mother's daughter."

I laid my hand on hers, and felt it tremble at my touch. Her slender fingers clutched the cold parapet-stones of the bridge convulsively. Very slowly they unloosed their grip, and lay in mine. She turned in silence, and the moonlight shone upon her face. I became aware of a slow and gracious transformation in her. The averted eyes sought mine timidly, and then with a fuller glance. It seemed as though the sweet girlish Lucille of earlier days, long exiled, came back with a silver sound of laughter, gliding with swift feet upon the moonbeams. Her eyes met mine in one long look of exquisite surrender. "O, Robert," she whispered. And then, like a bending flower, she swayed toward me, and was in my arms.

An hour later we walked through the empty streets of Ronda, hand in hand, like two eager children.

Cristobel still shone steel-bright in a cloudless sky, and a single star hung like a lamp upon its peak. All was silent, save for the guitar, which still tanged-tanged beneath some secret window.

"He must be very patient and she very hard to win," Lucille laughed softly. "Why, he must have been playing that guitar for at least two hours."

"He probably is aware neither of his own patience nor her hardness to be won," I laughed back.

She looked at me with a kind of serious wonder, and said: "Are those your feelings? Is that really how men feel about women?"

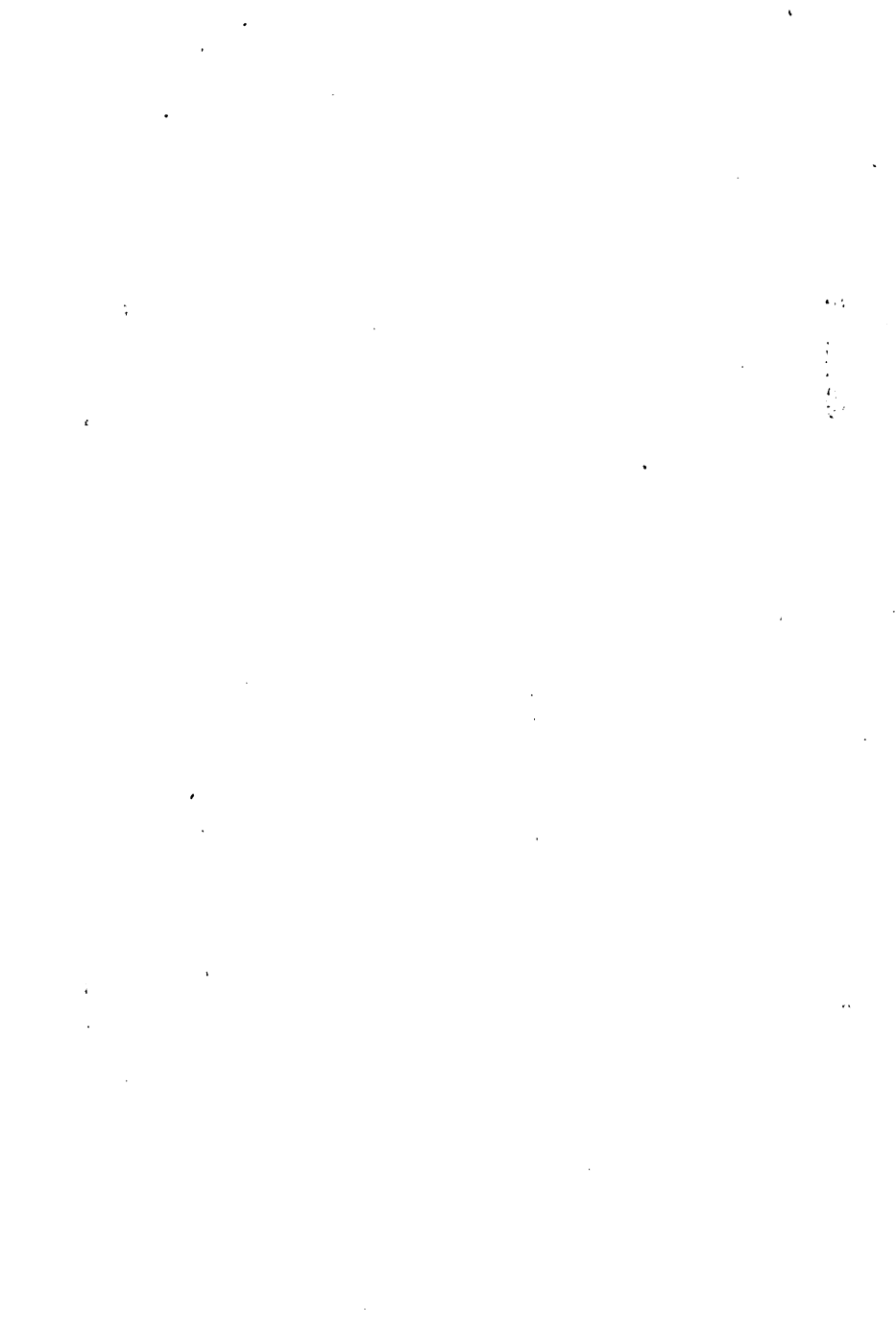
"I refer you to the oldest love-story in the world," I answered. "'And Jacob served seven years for Rachel, and they seemed unto him but a few days for the love he had to her.'"

"O, it is very sweet of you to say that." She lisped upon the word, just as she had done as a child.

By that sign I knew that all the sorrow of the years had melted into nothingness, and that I had found the true Lucille again.

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